

# *KHARE MASTER*

*V. Shirurkar*

*Birds teach their young ones to fly. Then the fledglings leave the nest. Kharemaster left Manutai and started his journey home, but he did not realize that on that day he had planted the seeds of his future loneliness.'*

This is an extraordinary true story of Anant Khare who appeared to be an ordinary drawing teacher, living and working in a village school near Pune at the turn of the century. He decided that his contribution to the nationalist movement would be to ensure that his daughters were educated to the highest level. And that is what happened. By the twenties, his dream had been fulfilled. His daughters were independent career women. His wife too was running a flourishing dairy. Everyone was successful.

Writing about her father at the age of 88, his daughter Balutai, using her pen name Vtभवारी Shirurkar tells us the story of Kharemaster and the world he lived in. Vibhavari herself embodied Kharemaster's dream. Yet she is a detached narrator, unflinchingly honest about herself as she is about her father. She tells us that after giving over his own life completely to the making of his children's lives. Kharemaster felt empty and excluded. Were the children responsible? Quite simply there was no undoing the past.

Malatibai Bedekar, who uses the pen name Vibhavari Shirurkar, was born Balutai Anant Khare in 1905. She graduated from Karve University at the age of seventeen and went on to do her Ph.D. in Sanskrit. A distinguished writer who courageously exposed social oppressions; her works in Marathi include *Kalyanche Nishwas* (1933), *Hindolyavar* (1934), *Bali* (1950), *Shabari* (1962) and *Kharemaster* (published by Popular Prakashan in 1993). The author and her husband, Vishram Bedekar, live in Pune.

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## *Acknowledgements*

### TRANSLATED FROM THE MARATHI EDITION

I had always wished to write about my parents and nearly two years ago I managed to complete around seventy-five pages. When I re-read those pages I felt that I had merely put some information down on paper, but somehow the depth of meaning was missing. Finally, with Ramdas Bhatkal's encouragement, I made up my mind to complete this work. At that point my health betrayed me, and I thought of asking Vishram Bedekar for help. It was easier said than done. I realized that I would have to work on this book alone. To console myself I thought that, after all, a dependence on your husband in order to disengage from your parental obligations would have met the approval of today's feminists!

There are some references in the text to contemporary events. Some of these dates have been changed purposely. I would like to thank Dr. Sunand Sane for his suggestions on this book.

7 March 1993 M. B.

### *Introduction*

Vibhavari Shirurkar, BA, shocked the Marathi middle class in 1933 with the publication of her first book of short stories, *Kalyanche Nishwas*. As the name suggested, the stories held within them the sighs of women whose lives had never found fulfilment. Two novels were published over the next two years: *Hindolyavar* (1934) and *Virlele Swapna* (1935). These books also dealt with the oppression of women in middle class homes, and the storm of criticism against the author continued to rage in both orthodox literary circles as well as among liberal social reformers. The orthodox were angry because the author had dared to question tradition, and the reformists because they felt that their efforts at improving the women's lot had not been acknowledged. They felt that Vibhavari Shirurkar's books were a travesty of truth.

Who was Vibhavari Shirurkar? It seemed like a pen name, but who was hiding behind it? All over Maharashtra, especially in Pune, there were scathing reviews, condolence meetings to mourn the author's 'death' and wishful obituaries in newspapers. Some people went to the extent of burning Vibhavari's effigies at public meetings. Yet no one seemed to know exactly who it was that they were protesting against. Never before or after had Maharashtra witnessed such furore over a literary event. It was more than a decade later that the author's real identity was disclosed as Miss Balutai Anant Khare, then superintendent of Kanyashala, a well-known school for girls in Pune. The publisher of her books was H.V. Mote, who had worked this device of the pseudonym in order to enable the author to write freely and frankly, and, what is more significant, had kept her identity a secret for such a long time.

Balutai Anant Khare, born in October 1905, was no ordinary schoolteacher. She had graduated from Karve University at the age of seventeen. This institution, now known as the famous SNDT University, was founded by the great pioneer of women's education, Maharshi Dhondo Keshav Karve. Balutai Khare first came under Karve's influence when she was taken by her father to join one of his schools at Hingane, a village near Pune. Her elder sister Manutai (later Krishnabai Mote), had preceded her there. Kharemaster, their father, a humble village schoolmaster with limited education, had a dream that his daughters would one day become graduates and post graduates. For him, taking his daughters to Hingane was a wish fulfilment, for the daughters, Hingane opened the doors to a whole new world. Many eminent Marathi writers, Sanskrit scholars and thinkers had been drawn to Professor Karve's work for the cause of women's education. Balutai Khare had the opportunity to study under some of them. There was a nationalist agenda attached to Karve's mission: Marathi was followed as the only medium of teaching.

In those early days of female education in India the Karve Ashram Boarding Home had more young widows and abandoned women as boarders than young girls interested in formal education. Manutai and Balutai Khare were exceptions. Despite the financial stress, theirs was a happy family where the children's well-being and education received

priority. Suddenly Balutai was exposed to the cruel realities of the lives of the women who lived around her in the ashram. She was too young then to grasp it all. But these women would talk among themselves, and their cries and sighs filled the boarding rooms at night. This exposure left such an indelible mark on Balutai's mind that years later, when she emerged as Vibhavari Shirurkar in the literary world, she found herself writing about those women of Karve Ashram.

After graduation Balutai Khare joined Kanyashala as a teacher. Within a few years she was made superintendent of the school. At the same time she continued with her own studies. She wrote a thesis on rhetoric or *alankar shastra* for her post-graduate degree in 1931, entitled *Alankar Manjusha*. It won her high acclaim and it continues to be appreciated by scholars. This extensive reading of Sanskrit texts and classical Marathi literature enriched her language and style. Balutai Khare was then invited to collaborate with other scholars in writing a treatise on Hindu law. As this law borrows heavily from the *Smritis*, she read those old texts in great detail and arrived at the conclusion that the plight of the Hindu woman was almost a direct result of these laws. She felt that she ought to do something about it. Balutai Khare began to write about women as she had known them, in book after book, under the pen name of Vibhavari Shirurkar.

Vibhavari Shirurkar's second book, *Hindolyavar*, is the story of a lonely middle class woman; she is married, but her husband has deserted her. She has no choice but to live this life of utter misery till she meets a man she likes and decides to live with, 'in sin', because in those days divorce was neither easy nor common. *Virlele Swapna* is about a new generation influenced by Marxist ideology.

Balutai Khare married the well-known litterateur and film-script writer and director Vishram Bedekar in 1938 and since then she has been known in the literary world as Malatibal Bedekar. She went on writing about the problems of women, both fiction and non-fiction, for many years of her life—*Jaai* (1952), *Shabari* (1962) and *Uma* (1966), all novels, and several short stories. Yet it was *Bait* (The Victim), a novel on the criminal and nomad tribes of Maharashtra which she wrote in 1950, that brought her real fame. *Bali* is regarded as the first work of fiction in Marathi on the lives of the dalits.

As the superintendent of her school, and in her zeal for social service, Balutai Khare had a lot of interaction with people from various sections of society. She saw the lives of the women of the depressed classes from a close distance and this added a new dimension to her understanding of the woman question. She saw, for instance, that the higher caste woman, when abandoned by her husband, had no escape at all from a defunct marriage. The lower castes seemed to solve the problem by sanctioning divorce by custom. But these were only patchwork palliatives—at the root of women's oppression lay the problem of lack of education and awareness. How was it that after fifty years of liberal, reformist thought the woman's situation had remained so unchanged?

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there were important debates on the woman question raging in Maharashtra. That was a time of great social reform—ban child marriage, taboo tonsure of widows, allow widow remarriage, open the doors of education to women. Once these reforms were more or less accepted, the debates seemed to come to a halt. Vibhavari Shirurkar tried to show in her novels and stories that a programme of reform cannot be an end in itself. The solution of one problem gives birth to another. In works such as *Uma* and *Shapiro* educated and economically independent girls cause

discord within families, the new woman finds that often her expectations from life and marriage are not fulfilled. Vibhavari Shirurkar continued to remain involved with social issues. She even contested the elections from a socialist platform, but did not win. She wrote some plays too and translated Eleanor Roosevelt and Sinclair Lewis into Marathi. She seemed to have settled down to a peaceful, retired life when at the age of 88 she wrote a novel on her father's life. *Kharemaster* (1993) is hailed not only as a great biographical work but also as a book which puts into perspective a life that encompassed Balutai Anant Khare, Vibhavari Shirurkar and Malatibai Bedekar. It is a story of her times.

Mumbai, 1997

RAMDAS BHATKAL

### A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

The meanings of most of the Marathi words retained in this translation will be clear from the context; hence a glossary has not been deemed necessary.

### *One*

Memories. A lifetime of memories. Etched deeply in my mind. Eighty-five years later, they remain as fresh as ever. Unfading. One leading to another, then to a third, and so on and on and on. Sometimes I sit engrossed, watching their play. I get amused, saddened and startled by turns, finally I tire out. I have become quite old now. Reading hurts my eyes. Walking makes my feet ache. The very threshold of my home has become too high for me to cross, it keeps me a prisoner here. So I go to a window and look at the passing world outside. But it is totally wrapped up in itself. It has no time to take notice of me. Again loneliness and a sense of being useless overtake me. I become restless, and seek solace in counting the beads of memories in my *Japmala*.

Yet memories can be obstinate. Obstinate and wilful. When I want a particular one to show up, it will not oblige, but an unwanted one might start hammering at my mind's door, like a ruthless creditor relentlessly pursuing his quarry, refusing to leave me alone. And once again I'm drawn unwillingly into their clutches.

Fifty years have gone by, but that final memory of Anna's last illness still haunts me to this very day. Towards the end, my father, Anna, had a stroke. At that time, I had made my own home in Pune. My brothers and sisters were scattered all over India, busy with their own lives. I used to visit Aai and Anna daily, as a pious person visits the temple. One day Anna had a seizure. He could no longer speak. He just lay there, helplessly; staring without blinking. To see him reduced to this was heart-wrenching. Aai never left Anna's side; she took care of his every need, but with a feeling of helplessness. She rested briefly only when I visited them.

One evening the dreaded message arrived, 'Anna has lost consciousness.' I rushed to his bedside. Aai sat by Anna, crying silently. I sat near Anna's feet. He lay very still, his expression peaceful. I composed myself with great difficulty. I felt Anna's chest and there was a faint heartbeat. I put my hand on his forehead, bent over him and said loudly in his ear, 'Anna, I'm Balu, I'm here.'

I watched Anna carefully as I spoke; I thought that maybe for an instant his eyelids fluttered. My cousin Appa had heard somewhere that applying the blood of a pigeon would enable a stroke victim to speak again. Maybe he had done this and it worked, for Anna's eye-lids moved. He half-opened his eyes and looked at us. He didn't seem to recognize anyone, but he was making a tremendous effort to do so. Aai sobbed with relief and folded her hands in prayer, I added my words to her silent plea. 'Anna, Anna, wake up. Anna, this is Balutai. Talk to me. Anna get well quickly. Anna, we want you with us for many, many years to come.'

My extreme joy over Anna showing signs of life must have transported me, in an instant, to my childhood. I babbled on and on like a child, repeating myself over and over again. When I was a child, I could ask Anna for anything and he had never turned me down. Even now, I felt that Anna would listen to me. He would get well, sit up and talk to us. But Anna was staring blankly. His lips quivered, but there was no sound. I could bear it no more. 'Anna,' I sobbed, 'Please, please won't you get well. You have done so much for us all our lives!' He looked at me and seemed to recognize me. He seemed to make a great effort to speak. And then the clear words rang out, 'Do you really mean that?'

I was devastated by those words. Even now I can hear their echo, and my heart is heavy. What was Anna saying? Did he feel that we were unaware of how he had toiled for us, the sacrifices he had made? In fact, we, his children, were eternally grateful to Aai and Anna, but we had never expressed it in words. Was that why Anna doubted our feelings? But children know that what they owe their parents cannot be measured! And they carry that awareness proudly, deep within themselves. It is not a debt that can be repaid in instalments, nor is there any creditor demanding its repayment. So children rarely give any receipt for that debt. Only in a crisis, do these walls of silence come tumbling down and the children's deep, abiding love and devotion are exposed.

Many years after Anna died, Aai developed cataracts in both her eyes. None of the children were- with her and the treatment was neglected. She began to lose her vision. As soon as my brother Bapu found out, he rushed from Calcutta and took Aai to a German doctor in Bombay. Bapu was very bright, capable and successful but he was a man of very few words. He would do anything for his loved ones, but he was not one to express his feelings. The doctor examined Aai's eyes. 'Both eyes are affected,' he pronounced. There is just one solution. She will be able to see only if we can find a donor.' Bapu responded at once, 'Doctor, give her one of my eyes. Do anything, but my mother must be able to see.' Aai started to cry. 'No, Bapu, no. I don't want to see the world by making you blind. No, I have seen all I wanted to see.'

How I wish Anna had witnessed this; all his doubts would have been laid to rest. The debt of love, however big, can be repaid by a single look or word of gratitude spoken from the heart at the appropriate time. Anna had asked, 'Do you really mean that?' Had I, then, never acknowledged this debt by either a look or a word? I have learnt over the years that words have the power to hurt. Unkind words that are best left unsaid can hurt; but so can the holding back of words that need to be said.

I was reminded of an incident that happened many years ago. At that time I was not married, and I lived with Aai and Anna. I was to give a talk someplace that day, and was deeply engrossed in planning what I was going to say. I began getting ready, I washed my

face, and stood in front of the mirror, applying a *kumkum tikka* to my forehead. At that moment Anna asked, 'Are you going out?' Yes, I have to give a lecture.' 'Wonderful! What's the topic?' Absent-mindedly I said, 'Oh, just something.' I realized that Anna was hurt by my curt reply. I applied the kumkum and turned around but Anna had walked away. I was planning to go and tell him about it but somehow it slipped from my mind. After that Anna never once asked me where I was going! It was only on the day Anna asked me that terrible question that I realized how hurt he must have been by these small incidents. Right there, I made a firm resolution. 'I'll make up for the past. From now, I'll talk about everything freely.'

But Anna did not stay to hear me. His eyes were closed forever.

With Anna's death, his children converged on Pune, together again after many years. We discussed amongst ourselves what would be best for Aai. Bapu said, 'I'll take Aai home with me.' Baal responded, 'No, no, why take her so far away? I'll take her home to Nagpur.' Mana said, 'I want to take her to Bombay.' loiter, all of us gathered around Aai. One by one we began taking our leave of her. 'Aai, it is time we went back.'

'Of course, you must go. What can you do by staying here?'

Bapu, Bal and Mana, each insisted that they wanted Aai to go home with one of them. Aai said, 'No, I'll stay right here in Pune,'

'Alone?'

'Oh, I'm not alone, Appa is here with me.' While saying this Aai rose and opened the large wooden trunk.

'Come, I want you to divide this amongst yourselves.'

The trunk contained silver articles, collected over the years. There were plates, little round bowls and drinking tumblers; we had eaten festive meals off these on special occasions—sacred days or days of celebration. A faint smell of age-old *attar* escaped from the *attardani*, and I could almost feel the drops of rose-water being sprinkled from the *gulabdani*. Each silver article was engraved with Aai's name. This was Anna's way of providing for Aai after him. We responded in unison, 'Aai, please leave all these things in the trunk. We don't want any of these.'

'I know, but I just want each of you to have something to remember your father by.'

'Aai, we don't need those to remember Anna. Anna and you made us what we are today. How can we possibly forget him?'

One by one, my brothers and sisters left for their respective homes. I was the only one in Pune, and I visited Aai regularly. We spent hours together; Aai reminiscing fondly about Anna, weeping softly all the while. And I too would be deeply moved.

When I went to Aai's one day, I found her sitting on the floor, next to the open trunk. 'Balutai, look! I found this bag at the bottom of the trunk.' The bag was crammed full of papers, about fifty sheets, covered with Anna's writing. Aai asked, 'What's written here?' I leafed through them. 'Anna has written the story of his life, starting from his childhood.' 'So that's it! He used to write every afternoon. Sometimes at night too. I had never bothered about what he was writing,'

It is said that death drops the final curtain on a person's life. But often it is death that reveals the things one has concealed. I used to ask Anna, 'Why don't you talk about your childhood, the place where you grew up, your mother, brother?' He would laugh it off. 'What's there to tell? I'm not very educated. What can I say?'

I used to think that maybe people did not think much of Anna because he did not have a great deal of formal education. But I knew that he was a far greater man than many so-called educated people.

How else could he have raised us the way he did? Seventy-five years ago, it was customary to sacrifice innocent seven-and eight-year-old girls in child-marriage without a thought to their future. To let a girl over eight remain unmarried was considered most sinful. In such times, this man educated not just one but all five of his daughters until they received their university degrees. That too living in a small village, within a closed society, ignoring the taunts and harassments of the community. If he hadn't had the conviction and courage, all five of us would have ended up in village homes, sitting around the kitchen fires, surrounded by a gaggle of children. Almost illiterate!

I skimmed through Anna's papers. 'Aai, how beautifully Anna has written!' 'When you were at school in Hingane, he would write to you every week,' Aai replied. 'I remember that before sitting down to write, for two whole days, he would walk up and down in the garden, planning the letter. Then he would begin to write. Even if I was busy in the kitchen, he would stop me and read aloud what he had written. After that, he would post it right away for you.' I could hear the pride in her voice.

'And when we received Anna's letter at Hingane, Superintendent Gadgil would take the letter and paste it on the bulletin board. And he would write in large letters, "Girls read this"!'

As I said this to Aai, everything came back to my mind.

## two

I began to read Anna's papers. Anna's neat, dearly familiar script rose before my eyes

We Khares hail from Guhagar. In those days, each village in Konkan was associated with a different Brahmin family. The Karves were from Murud, the Baals from Ladghar, the Kelkars from Cavha and the Tilaks from Chikhalgaon. So in that sense the Khares belonged to Guhagar. My childhood was spent in Guhagar. I had heard that the Khares used to be very wealthy once upon a time, but in my childhood our means were rather modest. We owned a little land and harvested rice and millet.

I loved our house and (he courtyard. Many trees flourished in our yard: tall coconut palms, leafy betel-nut and mango trees. The glimmering sea stretched beyond. As children, we romped and played on its pristine white sands. Our household had five members: Baba, Aai, my younger brother Sadu and I, and a distant cousin of my father, Atyabai. I was very fond of my mother. She was very fair-skinned, of small build, and had beautiful features. Her hair was very long, thick and jet black. When she washed it she would let it hang loose to dry; I would run towards her and wrap myself in her silken locks. She would laugh and push me away. Then when her hair dried, she would braid it and coil it on her head in a huge *khopa*, and decorate it with gold *moodh* and *angraphul*,

which were traditional hair ornaments. Then she would wear a *nath* in her nose and admire herself in the mirror. How gracious she looked! Everyday Aai took me to the Lakshmi Narayan temple. In the adjacent lane, the medicinal herb *adulsha* grew in abundance. Even today the smell of *adulsha* evokes memories of Aai. The first six or seven years of my childhood were filled with happiness.

I had barely turned eight when my father died suddenly. I was not close to my father; in fact I was a little afraid of him. He had a reputation of being hot-headed, but he managed the house and the farm efficiently. Baba used to draw water from our well using the water-wheel; we would be amused by its creaking, yet musical sounds. He was painstakingly careful in watering all the trees with the well water. Sometimes he would break open coconuts with a scythe. One day the scythe accidentally slipped and injured his hand. He began bleeding profusely. Aai asked me to fetch the *vaidya*. The *vaidya* lived just two doors from us. He came right away and tied a poultice of some sort on my father's forearm. After that he came every day and dressed the wound. But on the fourth day, my father had a lockjaw. His body went into contortions. His screams and spasms frightened Aai and Atyabai out of their wits. Sadu and I screeched in terror. He suffered terribly and died in just two days. I can still visualize his body, bent like a bow. The details of the following few days are hazy. But the long walk to the cremation grounds and the sight of his dead body in flames made an indelible impression on my mind. For days on end Aai sat by herself in a darkened room, crying.

One morning Atyabai said, 'Sarumawshi Vaidya has invited you and Sadu to her house.'

I took Sadu to Sarumawshi's. Sarumawshi was busy cooking and said, 'Ah, you're here? Go, sit out there. We will eat very soon.' We went to the sitting room. Vaidyakaka sat on the floor on a mat, leaning against rolled-up bedding, studying the astrological signs in the *Panchang*. I looked up at us. 'Come, sit here. But be quiet!' Sadu and I sat down. There was a large printed paper in front of Vaidyakaka. I craned my neck to look at it. Vaidyakaka asked me, 'Do you want to read this?'

'What is it?'

'It's a newspaper.'

This was a new word. I asked 'What's that?' 'Have you heard of Agarkar?' I shook my head. Vaidyakaka said, 'Agarkar is a very learned man. He produces this paper in order to inform people about what's happening. Such a paper is called a newspaper. Agarkar's newspaper is called *Kesari*. Come on, read it. Let's see if you can understand it. Read loudly.' He leant back on the bolsters. Although I had read books, I was a little overwhelmed-by the size of the paper. I held it clumsily and began reading, stumbling over the words. It said that somewhere a five-year-old girl had been given in marriage to a nine-year-old boy. I didn't understand that fully. But Vaidyakaka listened to what I had read and exclaimed, 'Son of a bitch! You leave that. Read the editorial.'

'Where is it? In that cupboard?'

'Silly! The editorial is the part printed under the banner "*Kesari*".'

In the beginning, as I read, I stumbled over the words. But later my reading improved. Vaidyakaka asked, 'Do you understand what you've read?'



‘A little. But I do want to read some more.’

Vaidyakaka smiled broadly. ‘Good! Come every Sunday. Come and read to me.’

Just then Sarumawshi appeared. ‘Come, come, eat. Everything is ready.’ As soon as we had finished eating, we charged out. Sadu shouted, ‘Dada, Dada, let’s race.’ We arrived home neck to neck. In our front yard, the tamarind pods had been spread out to dry. Sadu loitered around them. ‘Aai, Aai, we’re back,’ I called out as I entered the house. But I could not see her anywhere in the house. ‘Atyabai, where is Aai?’

‘Maybe she’s out at the back.’

But Aai was not there either. I searched the courtyard at the back of the house again. I could not see Aai anywhere. Then I looked in the house again. Inside, the door to the room traditionally used by a nursing mother was partially closed. I pushed it open, calling out, ‘Aai, Aai’. Only one tiny window let a little light into that dark room. Aai sat sack-like against the wall, with her head bent. She was crying. I ran to her. ‘Aai, what’s happened?’ She hunched over even more. ‘Aai, please don’t cry. Tell me what’s wrong?’ She looked up. I screamed, ‘Oh, my God! Aai! Aai! Your hair! Where’s your hair? What happened to your hair?’ Aai began sobbing loudly as if her heart would break. I could not bear to look at her. I ran from the room with tears streaming down my cheeks. Aai, like other widows of the time, had been forcibly shorn of all her hair. She was no longer the mother I had known all these years! That day my childhood was lost forever.

I went to school for two more years. I completed the second standard and then the third. I continued to visit Vaidyakaka regularly. He would ask me to read the newspaper to him. He used to talk about the news it contained and tell me stories about Tilak and Agarkar. Often he would say, ‘Like them, one must do something useful with one’s life. Otherwise what can we say? “I was born, I existed and I died.” What’s the use of living like that?’ I would listen, not knowing exactly what to make of it. This was my fourth and last year in the school since it taught only that far. I passed the annual examination. My future stretched bleakly ahead of me. My teacher advised, ‘If you want to learn more, you must go to Bombay. There is no future for you here.’ But Sarumawshi protested, ‘Don’t put ideas into his head. He’s barely eleven. How can he go to Bombay? Four years’ learning is enough. Now Antya, it’s time you took the load off your mother.’

And so I immersed myself in work. There were the household chores, the animals to tend, and the farm and land to take care of; this became my only world. Even my visits to Vaidyakaka were not as frequent as before. Whenever I went there, Vaidyakaka’s pronouncements would make me feel that I’d turn out to be as dumb as the animals I tended. One day I went to my friend Ganu Bagade’s house. Ganu was engrossed in drawing. As I watched him, something blossomed in me and along with Ganu; I began to draw the Naagnarsoba, Jiwali and other religious symbols. Most of the neighbourhood boys did not have many things with which to occupy themselves, and they aimlessly roamed the streets all day. I too spent countless hours in their company and would get home late, although that meant I had to face Aai’s wrath. One day I came home later than usual. Aai announced, ‘Antya, this Saturday we have to go to Sarumawshi’s. Don’t go out.’

‘Why, what’s happening at Sarumawshi’s?’

‘We’re going to see a bride for you.’

I was stunned. Angrily I said, 'No! Never! I don't want to get married/

Then do you propose to spend all day loafing around like this?'

I stared at her in annoyance.

'Antu, I cannot tolerate your behaviour. I have told Sarumawshi that i will bring you.' With this announcement, she went inside. I could not contain my anger. I left the house, walked down to the sea and sat on the beach. My mind was in an uproar. Finally I shouted aloud, 'No, I shall not get married.' I was struggling with myself, trying to decide what to do. Vaidyakaka had made me aware that there was a different world out there. I wanted desperately to explore that world, to do some of the things he had talked about, to be different. But what if Aai did not let me? What if Sarumawshi was insistent? Let her insist! I would not get married, and if forced to, I would leave home. But where could I go? Vaidyakaka always said, 'Go to Bombay.' How would I get there? Where would I live? How would I survive? And what if Aai became ill here? Well, Atyabai would take care of her.

I returned home with a million thoughts racing through my head. Aai was waiting for me. 'Where did you disappear like that?' I did not respond. The clothes were drying on the line in the middle room. I took them off the line, rolled them up in a bundle, took my cap from the hook where it was hanging, and placed it on my head. Aai watched me.

'Antya, what's going on?'

'I'm leaving home.'

'Whaaaat?' she cried in a tearful voice.

'I'm not going to marry. I don't want to be a problem for you. So I'll leave home.'

Aai was aghast. She burst into tears. 'Antya, don't leave me, please. You don't want to get married? Well then we will forget about it. But please don't go.'

I was very dejected. The days stretched endlessly before me. I went about my daily chores and spent the remaining time at the Narayan temple. The temple was being readied for the up-coming nine-day Navratra festival. I got involved in decorating and painting the temple; and spent many hours listening to the *kirtans* being sung and lectures from the Puranas. And, along with the other young men, I played the game of *dhumal*. I had almost given up visiting Vaidyakaka. On the eighth day of the Navratra, he appeared at our door. 'Ananta, will you come with me to the temple?'

We reached the temple and paid homage to Lord Narayan. Vaidyakaka walked around the temple. On its outer wall he noticed a large drawing of Maruti carrying the mountain Dronagiri, done in red-stone.

'Who drew this? It's very good.'

I replied, 'I did.'

'You? I didn't know you had this talent.' He grew serious. 'Ananta you are smart, you have the drive. Why do you waste it here? Listen to me. Just take a bold step and go to Bombay! Go get some more education. Right up to the Vernacular Final! I know you will make it. Or else, study art. Then you will get a job easily. But don't waste your life here.'

Vaidyakaka's words gave me a new impetus. Once again, I began dreaming of Bombay, planning what I would do. As soon as I got a job, I would take Aai and Sadu to

Bombay. I could think of nothing else. But I knew that once again, Aai would forbid me to go. One day, I mustered up my courage and announced to her, 'Aai I'm going to Bombay. I will study hard and get a job. Then I'll take you and Sadu to live with me.'

I had a difficult time convincing Aai. She did give me permission finally, but I could see how worried she was. Over and over again she asked me, 'Will you really take us to Bombay?' 'I will, I promise. How can I survive without you?' The day before I left, Aai and I talked late into the night. I laid my head in her lap and she ran her fingers through my hair. My heart was full of love for her and I was at peace. I don't know when I fell asleep. When I awoke, Aai was sitting beside me.

'Anta, I have prepared some food for you. Take it with you. You'll need it on the way.'

I had a bath, packed some clothes in a cloth bag, and ate a simple meal of *metkoot* and rice. Aai served a spoonful of curds in my palm; that was the custom when anyone was leaving, a 'comeback-soon' gesture. I slurped the curds, touched her feet asking for her blessings, and turned to go.

'My child, go safely. Send us a letter as soon as you reach Born-bay.' She placed two *dhabbu* coins in my hand. Tears streamed down her cheeks. I felt my own eyes moisten. The flood washed away all the bitterness I had felt. I turned round and left.

I focused all my efforts on trying to reach Bombay. That meant crossing the Veldur Creek, then the Dabhol Port, after which I would be in Bombay. I started on the road to Veldur. Till I reached the Arya Hills, I felt strong as well as brave. Once I crossed those hills and lost sight of Guhagar, however, I was overcome with the feeling that I had left my home behind me forever. I was all alone in the world. I continued on determinedly though, pausing occasionally to wipe my tears. And then my chappal snapped. I looked at the rough road ahead. How would I proceed now? I sat on a large rock at the roadside, took a strip of cloth out of my knapsack and tied my chappal to my foot. I took a few tentative steps, worried, what if the cloth gave way? Just then I heard a rattle. A bullock cart came by and someone called out, 'Anta, is that you? Where are you going?' Ganu Bagade's uncle was in the cart. He inquired about my plans. Then he asked me to climb into his cart and took me as far as Veldur Creek. I touched his feet; he turned back. As I stood there alone, I noticed an old man standing surrounded by his baggage, mumbling to himself helplessly.

'Ajoba, I'll carry your things.' I helped carry his baggage and put it in the ferry. He paid my fare for the ferry and dropped me at the Dabhol pier.

I realized then that whatever simple acts of kindness I had performed without any expectations had been returned many times over. So very many people had gone out of their way to be kind to me!

At Dabhol, I was standing by a tea shop. Seeing my torn chappal the shopkeeper said, 'My boy, how will you walk with this chap-pal? Let me fix it.' He got it repaired and also gave me plenty to eat. On my part, with coloured chalk, I drew a sketch of a cup and saucer, complete with steam coming out of the cup, on the side wall of his tea shop. He was very pleased and packed a parcel of food and saw me on my way. From there, I climbed the hillock and reached Dapoli. Travelling through Khed, Mahad, Rewas and

Dharamtar, I finally reached Bombay. My journey was lightened by (he kindness of several strangers; some gave me food or a paisa or two, others showed concern.

I crossed the creek and got off on the Bombay side at the ferry wharf popularly known as Bhaucha Dhakka or the brother's docks. I was mesmerized by the sights of the 'Bombay' about which I had heard so much. I had never seen so many people in one place. Everyone seemed to be in a tearing hurry. Porters in red uniforms rushed about straining to push carts laden with baggage. Carriages, horse-drawn trams and buggies vied for space. I could only watch, overwhelmed by the confusion and the noise. It was getting dark and I had to reach Girgaum. I had to get moving because I didn't know which way Girgaum was. But I had heard that many of the folks from Konkan were living in Girgaum; there I would surely find someone to help me. I stopped several people and asked where Girgaum was. Some were in a hurry and didn't give me clear directions; others didn't bother to answer. The streets were dimly lit with kerosene lamps. I could not see the road clearly. Finally I reached Girgaum, after having lost my way several times. By this time it was fairly late at night; I was bone weary and starving, I drank water from a roadside tap, worried where I would spend the night. The shops on both sides of the street were closed. Each shop had a wooden plank in front of it instead of steps. I put my cloth bag down on one of the planks, rested my head on it and drifted off to sleep.

I was rudely awakened by somebody prodding me in the ribs. Startled, I sat up. It was a uniformed policeman. I stood up. He fired questions at me. I was frightened out of my wits. 'Get going! If I find you here tomorrow, watch out!' He warned me and strode away. Now, what was to be done? Where should I go? The problems I faced remained unresolved. I was wide awake now, but I remained there; it was still the middle of the night. With the break of dawn, I sat up. From time to time, tears would well up. The sun rose in the sky. Just then a man appeared. Seeing his stern face and piercing eyes, I began to tremble. 'You, there! Why are you sitting here?' I had lost all power of speech. Unlocking the shop he said, 'Get lost! You can't sit here. Don't you have someplace else to go?'

'No, nowhere.'

'No? Then why the hell are you here? Where are you from?'

'Guhagar.'

Just then another man appeared. He was the owner of the shop next door. It was a tin shed whose walls were made of jute sackcloth. He spread his wares: peppermint candy, fresh cashews, *papads*, *kurdyas* and other foodstuff from Konkan, and said, 'Good morning Phatak mama. Looks like you have a visitor. Where's he from?'

'Says he's from our Guhagar.'

'Be careful. These boys run away from home and then there are terrible problems.'

I spoke fervently, 'No, I have not run away.' I turned to Phatak mama. 'I swear by God Narayan. I have come with my mother's permission.'

My invoking 'Narayan' touched a chord. Narayan is the temple deity of Guhagar. Phatak mama began to look less doubtful.

‘You do sound like you’re from Guhagar. Why have you come here?’ he asked in a softer tone.

‘To go to school.’

‘School? How far did you learn in Guhagar?’

‘I have passed the fourth standard. That’s as far as that school teaches.’

Phatak mama picked up the broom. I went forward. ‘Please, allow me to sweep. Let me have the broom.’ I was trying to throw myself at his mercy. He gave me the broom. Just then the bhatji from the nearby tea shop brought him tea in a kettle. Phatak mama asked, ‘Did you eat anything last night?’ I shook my head in reply. Mama asked the bhatji to fetch another cup of tea and something to eat.

‘What do you plan to study?’

‘I want to pass my Matric.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Fourteen.’

‘You silly boy, if you go to school now you will need seven more years. You’ll be twenty-one by the time you are a matriculate. By the way, have you brought your school certificate?’

School certificate? I faltered. When I left Guhagar I had given no thought to my school certificate. I shook my head.

‘Then no school will admit you!’

Just then the bhatji appeared with tea and *pohe*. Mama asked me to eat. He looked at me, contemplatively. I ate the pohe and drank the tea with great gusto.

The bhatji left with the empty dishes. Phatak mama began dusting his sewing machine. I took the duster from him and started cleaning the machine. He became engrossed in sewing. From time to time he looked at me. I sat on the plank outside, afraid of the next step. Where would I live? How would I eat? I knew that poor students depended on the generosity of kind people for their meals. They made arrangements to have their meals, with different families, once every week, by turn. I asked Phatak mama, ‘Do you think I’ll be able to make arrangements for my meals, here?’ ‘We’ll see. Anyway, come home with me today.’ Phatak mama closed the shop for the afternoon. ‘Let’s go,’ he said. I followed him.

Phatak mama lived in a chawl in Kandewadi. This chawl, like all Bombay chawls, was three stories high. Each floor had about ten two-room units; a common balcony linked them with a common toilet at its end. When we reached his place, I waited outside in the balcony. Mama went to the kitchen. He talked for a long time with his wife. Then he came to the front room and asked me to step inside, ‘Sit over there on the stool. Listen carefully to what I have to say, and then decide.’

Phatak mami stood listening from her position at the kitchen door. Mama said, ‘Since you don’t have your certificate, going to school is out of the question. You will survive only if you learn a trade. I will teach you tailoring. Are you willing to learn?’ I saw a ray of hope when all doors seemed to have closed. Yet I could not speak. I just stared at him. Mami asked, ‘My boy, what’s your name?’

‘Anant.’

‘Listen, Anta, you can learn in a year if you set your mind to it. Now that you’ve come this far, you might as well get something out of this.’

Mama said, ‘Now hear me out. For one year, you will do all that is needed in the shop and learn to stitch clothes. I will not pay you during this period. You will live here and eat with us. If at the end of one year, you have learnt well, then I’ll pay you. Then you can fetch your mother and brother and set up house. Does that seem reasonable?’

Mami added, ‘In any case, my husband needs a helper at the shop. Your problem of food and shelter will be solved. Stay here and help me around the house. Is that acceptable?’

My dreams of schooling and of studying art crumbled. But what was the alternative? How could I live in this city? At the very least, I would become a tailor. I would learn to sew, then earn money and fetch Aai and Sadu. Phatak mama was waiting for my answer. ‘Yes,’ I responded, ‘I’m ready to learn.’

From that day, I began living at Phatak mama’s.

The new world in Bombay, dirty and congested, was in sharp contrast to my beloved Konkan. The house and the compound in Konkan had been very spacious; here, three tiny rooms formed our cramped quarters. In Konkan tall coconut trees swayed in the breeze. Parrots, sparrows and cuckoos warbled and sang in shady mango trees. Here, the only greenery was provided by tulsi plants growing in pots hanging in the balcony. The tulsi has religious significance and was therefore grown by each household and worshipped every day. The raucous cawing of crows and the incessant cooing of pigeons provided background music. Instead of a stream of fresh milk from one’s own cows, here we had to be satisfied by the milk brought to us by red-capped milkmen from suburban Vasai. The ten families on our floor shared the washing place at the end of the balcony. It had only three taps. Every morning, I was rudely awakened at dawn by the chatter of the people who lined up at the common latrines. Later in the morning, the pounding footsteps of people rushing to work created a racket on the wooden stairs.

Gradually I became used to all this. I no longer had time to dream about Konkan. In this hectic world of Bombay, there was the relentless pressure of chores, from the minute I got up. I was always uneasily aware that I was dependent on the good graces of Phatak mama and Mami. I tried to lighten Mami’s workload as much as possible. In the morning, before going to the shop, I swept the floor, filled water, washed the clothes and cleaned the dishes used for tea and for the morning meal. At the shop, I would sweep and clean, fill drinking water in the earthenware pot, and place flowers and incense before the little wooden shrine and the images of the Gods. By then Phatak mama would show up. He would greet customers, take their measurements, and tell them when their clothes would be ready. I watched him and learnt a lot from him on how one treats customers. His shop must have been well-known for his customers were of all sorts, rich and poor, educated and illiterate. Mama was an expert at his work and began teaching me, step-by-step. In a few days I began to understand how to measure, how to cut the cloth, how to stitch it and make buttons and buttonholes. When the clothes were ready, it was my job to deliver them to rich customers. At the end of the year, when I had learnt to do all these

things, Phatak mama said, 'Ananta, you have passed your tailoring test with flying colours.'

I was justifiably proud of myself, but made no response. I realized that now Mama would start paying me and I would be able to fetch Aai and Sadu, and together we would set up our own house. On the first of the month, Mama gave me ten rupees. I was very happy, but one thing still bothered me; here, I had nothing to read. At night, our neighbours in the chawl used to gather in the balcony. But since all they did was gossip, I didn't feel like joining them. In Guhagar, Vaidyakaka's discourses had been like a candle lighting the darkness. I missed them terribly.

One day, a horse-carriage stopped outside our shop. A gentleman named Raosaheb Rege alighted from it, and entered the shop. Phatak mama was a little flustered to see him. Rege was probably our most important customer. He had once been the headmaster of a high school and had very good connections. In those days, because education was not very widespread, there were very few high schools. So the headmaster was considered very important.

Raosaheb had shown up in person at the shop as he needed a Parsi-style long coat in a hurry. Phatak mama was contrite. 'You shouldn't have taken the trouble. I would have come to your house.' Saying this, he began taking Raosaheb's measurements. As he called out the measurements, I wrote them down. Raosaheb noticed me and was curious. Mama praised me enthusiastically. Raosaheb stared at me through his thick-lensed glasses. Perhaps he could not see well.

'You've passed the fourth standard, have you? Hmm, you can read well then, can't you?'

'Oh, very well indeed!' Mama interjected.

'My eyes bother me, but read one must. I could surely use a lad like this. I don't need him daily, a couple of times a week will suffice.'

Phatak mama said immediately, 'Ananta will gladly do it! Right Ananta?'

I nodded happily.

I went to the Reges that Saturday, a holiday. Raosaheb asked me to read an excerpt from a book.

'Well, that's good! You'll come regularly, won't you?' I said, 'Oh, yes I will.' Raosaheb continued, 'I don't see very well. Sometimes I have to attend meetings on weekends. Will you accompany me?' I was happy that a new world was opening up to me. I went to the Reges faithfully for a month. At the end of that month, he gave me three rupees. What I had learnt from him during that month was, however, far more valuable than those three rupees. I used to read the newspapers to Regesaheb. His favourite newspaper was *Sudharak*, edited by Gopal Ganesh Agarkar. Agarkar used to be the editor of *Kesari*. But now he had parted company with his friend Bal Gangadhar Tilak and started his own newspaper. All this I gradually learned from Regesaheb. He would often speak eloquently about Agarkar. I was learning far more than I had dreamt. One day, when I went there as scheduled, I was surprised to see Regesaheb teaching his eight-or nine-year-old daughter in English. His wife, however, did not like this at all and remonstrated. But Regesaheb asserted, 'Women must expand their world beyond the rolling pin,

broaden their horizons and sharpen their intellectual tools. Isn't that so Chandu?' And his daughter Chandu happily agreed. I watched this whole interchange in amazement.

I used to accompany Raosaheb Rege on his walk to Chowpatty Sea Face. On the way, several people would stop to talk to him. In those days Chowpatty was not a favourite promenade place as it was surrounded by warehouses and the beach was marshy. Right on the road to Chowpatty, however, was the elegant mansion of Mangaldas Nathubhai, with a beautiful garden in front; this was Raosaheb's favourite place. He and his friends would gather there and they would discuss and argue fiercely about the issues of the day. I would stand on the sidelines and listen. Raosaheb was a teacher after all. He was an expert at using examples to drive his point home. One of his contemporaries was Agashemaster. Raosaheb argued with Agashemaster with great fervour. Agashemaster was always firm in his conviction. 'We must unite and stand shoulder to shoulder to fight the British. Then self-rule will be a matter of course. Social reforms can come later.'

Raosaheb responded calmly, 'Look here, this topic needs deeper discussion. Let's see, come and take your evening meal with us tomorrow and we'll thrash it out.'

Agashemaster screamed as if stung by a scorpion. What are you saying? I'm a Brahmin, you're a Saraswat.'

Raosaheb remained calm. 'You are wrong. We Saraswats are the true Brahmins. We have received the blessing of Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning. You're just Bhats, the priests. But let that be. Tell me, if you and I cannot sit side by side for a meal, how can we stand shoulder to shoulder to fight the British? That's why, in my opinion, first let's get rid of this nonsense about caste, then talk of gelling independence.'

Raosaheb had another favourite meeting place. That was the office of the newspaper *Induprakash*, the leading newspaper of that time. Government servants, the leaders of society, the elite would gather there and discuss and debate local and regional events dear to their heart. They used to criticize and ridicule Tilak's newspaper *Kesari*. Tilak was politically a revolutionary, wanting to throw out the British, while according to *Induprakash*, British rule was God's gift to Hindustan. I was a *Kesari* fan. But I realized that in the *Induprakash* office it was not politically prudent to be on Tilak's side. Once I slipped, said something in favour of Tilak, and was promptly reprimanded.

There was an imposing statue of Queen Victoria in the central square of the Fort area, in downtown Bombay. It was in the midst of a road that hummed with activity, day and night. Someone tarred the face of that statue, twenty or thirty feet from the ground. To climb that high and escape without leaving a trace was a remarkable feat! Naturally, this extraordinary bravery filled common people with pride. But there was uproar in official circles. The authorities could not find the person who had committed this act of treason. And try as they might, the tar on the statue's face could not be removed. The British government was furious and retaliated; young men were taken from their homes and beaten. The *Induprakash* group railed against Tilak. It alleged that such despicable acts were the result of Tilak's teachings; Tilak had inflamed the younger generation to such madness by his writings. Soon after this there was a plague epidemic. The inhuman methods that the British officers used in stamping it out created a lot of discontent among the people. As a result, a young man named Damodar Chaphekar shot dead a British officer named Rand. Later it came to light that Chaphekar was also responsible for the tarring episode. People were electrified by Chaphekar's courage. Damodar was the son of



Haripant Chaphekar, the *kirtankar* at the Kala Ram Mandir at Thakurdwar. He used to join his father at the kirtans. I used to attend that kirtan regularly, so I had seen Damodar and had also spoken to him. When I heard Damodar's name, I felt he was standing right there before me and forgetting my surroundings, I exclaimed, 'Bravo, Damodar!'

At that moment I was in the *Induprakash* office, in the midst of a group of people. They were stunned into silence. Rege Raosaheb roared, 'Fool!' I was frightened. If looks could kill, I would have been dead on the spot. 'If the police knew about this, you would be flogged till you came to your senses!'

From that moment I was afraid and from then on, I kept my thoughts to myself.

This was an era of many new, progressive ideas. The Prarthana Samaj was established as a part of a movement to reform the Hindu religion. Its building was elegant, clean, and neat with polished chairs, benches, and a marble altar. I was very surprised when I saw this. Was it possible to pray here? I pictured our temples with their chaotic, freewheeling atmosphere. The worshippers here were prominent people, stylish and resplendent in their starched clothes. Their conversation was about reforming society, critical of our Gods and rituals and of the noise and confusion of kirtans and bhajans in our temples. I was confused. I did not feel that all this criticism was valid. But increasingly I felt that there must be change.

Tatya Takle, the Konkani shopkeeper next door was caustic in his comments. 'These half-breeds! Already half-way towards becoming Christians! They call this a prayer! What nonsense! Who ever heard of praying sitting on chairs and benches? Dressed in such finery? They are just playing games to please the British.'

I listened to both sides. I had no conviction in this matter, yet I felt I had to do something, and this was always foremost in my mind. As I frequently accompanied Raosaheb, word of our tailoring shop spread and we got many new customers. Phatakrama gave me a raise and told me that I should fetch Aai and Sadu and set up our own home. I took his advice, rented a two-room house in Phanaswadi and fetched Aai and Sadu. Soon, yet another of my dreams was fulfilled. I found out about a drawing class, which was held every afternoon from one to three, during which time the shop was closed. I began attending the class and was exhilarated that I was finally able to study art.

I was content. Aai and Sadu were with me, I was in the company of good people, I was reasonably well established and was finally studying my favourite subject. Now, from the neighbours' point of view, I was a 'good catch'. In those days, when a girl turned six or seven, her parents would start eyeing eligible bachelors. 'Anantrao, when are you getting married?' was the constant refrain. Phatakrama also urged me to get married. Aai of course was very eager to see me get married and settled. She had been ready to marry me off, back in Konkani, when I was just fourteen.

Now I was past twenty, but I paid no attention to my mother's pleas. Actually, I often wondered what it would be like to have a wife; I had begun to be aware of young ladies. But I was also ashamed of these yearnings, and a little afraid, too. I received many marriage proposals. But they were all from parents of very young girls, barely seven or eight years old. To marry such a young girl was out of the question. I had decided firmly that I would not marry a child-bride. One day, one of Phatakrama's friends from Awaas, Lakhoo Nana Shintre came to find a match for his daughter. Phatakrama suggested my

name. Lakhoo Nana watched me for a few days and told Phatak mama that he approved of me as a son-in-law. When Phatak mama asked me, I said, 'If the girl is fifteen or sixteen, I'm ready to see her.' Everyone poked fun at me. 'Girls are married at seven or eight. Where will you find an unmarried fifteen year old? A marriageable fifteen-year-old girl is surely a widow.'

But I was firm in my resolve. Aai and Phatak mama were annoyed. 'Social reform is not for people like us. The rich, the privileged can afford the luxury. We will become complete outcasts.'

I consulted Raosaheb Rege. He sided with the others. 'Don't go' after what you cannot get. One must behave according to one's status in life. Be realistic.' I realized then that even for people with progressive ideas, there was a vast difference between preaching and action. Then what chance had someone like me! So, with reality being brought home to me, I agreed to see the girl at Awaas.

At Awaas, the Shintres had a large house with a large courtyard. I was reminded of Guhagar. Lakhoo Nana Shintre called out to his daughter, 'Varu, Varu!' From the branches of the nearby champak tree came the response, 'Yes, Nana?'

'Where are you? What are you doing up in the tree?'

'Gathering flowers, Nana.'

'First come down here. You can gather flowers later.'

Varu scrambled down the tree, stood in front of her father, and shook out her *parkar*—the traditional floor-length skirt, which she had drawn up between her knees and tucked behind her, at her waist. 'Yes, Nana?'

'This gentleman has come to see you. You want to get married, don't you?'

Varu blushed deeply and ran inside. She was very fair, slightly snub-nosed, but slim and smart-looking. She was only nine, I was twenty. But since I was helpless, I said I approved of her and we were married.

### Three

Anna's writing had abruptly stopped here. I scanned the remaining pages. They were blank. 'Aai, had Anna ever read this out to you?'

'Never. What does it say?'

'Anna came to see you when you were in Awaas. You had climbed a tree—.'

Aai broke out into laughter. 'I almost fell out of the tree that day.'

'Do you remember those days?'

'Which days?'

Tour wedding. Then how Anna brought you to Bombay, how you lived with Aaji, Sadukaka and Anna in a chawl—.'

‘Oh, yes, I remember it all clearly. You know, I didn’t like that tiny house at all. When I was leaving my parent’s place in Awaas after the wedding, Aai blessed me, held me close to her, and said, “My child, be happy at your in-law’s place. That will be your home from, now.” When I saw the rooms in the chawl in Bombay I couldn’t believe my eyes. I felt like a caged bird. Why had Aai sent me to such a small house? You remember the Awaas house? It was so large! There was a courtyard both in the front and at the back, with trees all around us! We had so many coconut trees that we stored coconuts in a tiny room off the back porch. We grew our own rice and stored it in a large bin near the front door. So many happy memories! I spent many pleasant hours playing all sorts of games under our shady mango trees with the girls in the neighbourhood. Sometimes, in the afternoon, the women who went from house to house with their grinding stones would come. They used to pound and grind the household grain under Aai’s supervision; our house would hum with their chatter and the *khhadd-khhadd khhadd-khhadd* sounds of their grinding stones. My friends and I would try to drown out their sounds with our songs as we swung on the creaky old swing in the inner room when it became too hot to play outside. Oh, it was so much fun!

‘And the place in Bombay? Don’t ask! Each family in the chawl had just two rooms, the front room and the kitchen behind it. The kitchen had a little *mori* where we could wash our hands, but for everything else we had to go to the common facilities at the end of the long common balcony outside the rooms. Our drinking water, too, came from the taps at the end of the balcony. The room at the front had barely one window. Anyone who passed by along the balcony outside could peep in. There was very little privacy. I didn’t care for it at all.’

Aai’s reminiscences were interrupted by a call, ‘Mawshi, I’m leaving.’

‘Wait! Bhiva is getting ready to leave. Let me give him something to eat. He must be hungry.’ Aai went to the other room. I wondered, if, at that tender age, she understood what was meant by marriage? She returned in a moment. ‘Aai, did you realize what a husband was?’ She laughed. ‘I didn’t have the faintest idea. You know at Awaas I used to often go with Aai to the *Mangalagaurs* that were celebrated in honour of new brides. All the women and girls would gather. We used to sing and play games. I remember this one particular game. We would dance around a newly married girl, pretend to capture her and would subject her to this inquisition in song:

Prisoner, prisoner,  
How’ll you escape?  
My *saasu* beats me.  
She does the right thing.  
My *saasra* beats me.  
He does the right thing.  
My *deer* beats me.  
He does the right thing.

In the game she would try to escape the beating of her mother-in-law, father-in-law, brother in-law, in fact, all her in-laws, while the girls encircling her tried to prevent her from escaping. The game ended if she managed to break through their cordoning arms. So my image of a *saasar* was a place where everyone beats you all day.'

I hesitated to ask Aai the question that nagged me. 'Did Aaji ever beat you? And Anna?'

'Oh, no! Never! Saasubai was very gentle and loving. She's the one who gave me my new name—Indu. She said it was her favourite name. And I did everything just like my mother had taught me. Your father too, never once spanked me.'

'What did your mother teach you?'

'Aai said, "Never sprawl in front of elders. Never answer back. If your Saasubai is working, plead at once, 'Please rest, let me do it.' And never refer to your husband by name. Always use the honorific terms for him, Ikade or Tikade'." Of course, from the time I was very young I knew that a girl uttered her husband's name only when her friends or relatives teased her and forced her to. And then the name would only be uttered in an *ukhana*, a specially composed rhyming couplet. I remember how brides blushed as they pronounced their husband's name, even in the *ukhana*. Of course I didn't take your father's name, but I didn't say "Ikade, Tikade".'

Just then, my cousin Appa appeared with a question relating to her milk business. 'Mawshi, have the Chavans paid last month's bill?'

'No, they haven't paid for milk these past two months. We must do something about it.'

'I'll send Maruti.' Appa turned towards the front verandah. Aai talked about the headaches of the business. I went home after a while but thought continually of Aai's reminiscences. Aai's only free time was in the afternoon. The rest of the day she was engrossed in work. But the treasure trove of her memories had just been opened before me. I decided I would explore it fully in the afternoons, and I showed up two days later. I had the *Kesari* with me. Aai was lying down, resting. She carefully sounded out the word *Kesari*. I began laughing.

'Aai, do you remember when we were young you used to write out our alphabet for us?'

'Of course, I do. You used to cry and ask me to write the letter "Ba" and I'd do that. Your Anna had taught me the "Ba" in Bagala. That's all I remembered.'

'Aai, do you remember how Anna taught you?'

Aai laughed, 'Sure, I remember it very clearly. Ka for *Kamal*, Kha for *Khalbatta*, Ga for *Ganpati*, Gha for *Ghadyal*, Cha for *Chamcha*. He drew a picture of simple things for each letter of the alphabet. I remember these by heart.'

'And what about the nasal characters?'

'No, he didn't teach me those.'

I realized that Anna could not have thought of a word beginning with the Marathi nasal letters. There are no words starting with these characters.

‘His teaching me caused such a furore! I was not at all prepared to learn. But he threatened that if I did not learn he would send me back to my mother’s place.’

“What do you mean?”

‘In Bombay, all the men folk in the chawl would be at work during the day. Sadubhauji and your Anna would also be out working. In the afternoon, Saasubai used to rest. What was I to do after all my chores were done? There was no one to talk to, no one to play with. The only person of my age in the chawl was Thaki Barve. She lived in the rooms near the washing place. But she was terribly afraid of her mother-in-law, who kept a strict watch on her. So I ‘used to wander around in the balcony, listening to the women gossip.’

“What did the women in those days talk about?”

‘Exactly as they do now! You know how the women gossip at the Tulsibau temple. So and so has missed a period, someone is expecting, A’s husband beats her, B’s husband has remarried, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law complaining about one another—just the same kind of things. One day the women were giggling because Babutai and her husband closed their doors and windows in the afternoon. I was terribly innocent and didn’t understand why they were giggling.’

“When I went home I asked, “Saasubai, why do Babutai and her husband close their doors and windows in the afternoon?” I didn’t realize that at that very moment your Anna had unexpectedly entered. He heard what I said and announced, “Indu, you are not to mix with these women from now on.”

‘ “But how is she supposed to spend her time?” Saasubai objected.

‘I’ll take care of that’ Your Anna left immediately and returned with a pencil and slate. “From tonight, I’m going to teach you to read and write,” he said. I protested, “I don’t want to learn. At my mother’s place women do not learn.” Your Anna became very angry. “Maybe there they do not, but here you must learn.” Obstinate, I shook my head. He continued, “Gather your clothes and start packing. You don’t want to learn? Fine! I’ll take you back to your *maker*. Right (his moment!)” I was terribly frightened. Tearfully, I said, “I’ll learn.” That very night after I had cleaned up after dinner, he began teaching me to read and write. He was a very good teacher and I myself began enjoying my lessons. Now in the afternoons, I sat in the gallery practising the alphabet.

‘One day as I was doing this, Thaki appeared stealthily and whispered, “What are you doing?” I started telling her in whispers how to write the letters of the alphabet. To no avail. Her mother-in-law appeared and gave her one thump on her back.

“I have told you a hundred times not to associate with this heathen household. Get inside! God only knows what kind of neighbours we have. A man who calls his wife by her name. All day long it’s Indu this, Indu that. Teaching her to read and write. Tell him, if he wants to make his wife a *maddam*, go ahead, but don’t corrupt our girls.” I was in tears. Thaki was my only friend. She and I used to meet at the washing-place. She used to complain about her mother-in-law while I praised Saasubai. I would tell her everything—what Saasubai and I had cooked that day, what else we had done. But now Thaki was lost to me. Her mother-in-law began watching her with an eagle’s eye.’

‘People in the chawl were scandalized by these teaching sessions! They began passing by our window on purpose, to catch us in the act. Real peeping toms! Their loud giggles would almost drown out the sound of the lessons; I used to be terrified, but your Anna used to say calmly, “If they laugh, they’ll show their teeth. You study! If you’re to be an outcaste, so be it! They’re not the ones feeding you, right?”’

‘Aai, were people really so opposed to women’s education then?’

‘I can’t begin to describe it! I, too, gave up mixing with these women, talking to them. My housework and learning to read and write became my only life. Your father, too, stopped visiting the neighbours, or even striking up a conversation; but just busied himself in his work. But one day, suddenly, Saasubai died. What they call the heart or something. After her death, Sadubhauji began saying, “I just don’t like it here. I miss Guhagar and I want to go back.” I don’t know what the two brothers discussed between themselves but Sadubhauji went back to Guhagar. I missed Saasubai acutely, and felt terribly lonely. And then there was another terrible calamity.’

‘Oh, no! What happened to our family next?’

‘Not just us! It was widespread and affected everyone. Rats began dying all over the town. “Plague, Plague”, was the cry heard! So many people were infected by this terrible disease. Lumps would appear in their armpits or groin. And they would have such high fever that in a couple of days, death was inevitable. We were all terrified. Very little was known about this disease. There were no known remedies for it. So many people died that the dead were hauled away by the cartload. If someone left home there was terrible anxiety whether he would return alive. But Balutai, as always fate intervened on behalf of your Anna.’

‘Why, what happened?’

You know those drawing exams your Anna had passed? The big saheb asked him if he would go as a drawing teacher to the Mission School at Ghodnadi on a monthly salary of Rs.30. Your Anna looked at the situation around us and agreed to go. Thirty rupees was a large sum in those days! Not to mention the horror of the plague in Bombay. I was very relieved. The saheb gave him instructions on how to get to Ghodnadi. We packed our belongings right away! We couldn’t wait to leave Bombay!’

A few days later I was on my way to Aai’s. Near Tilak Bridge, I spotted a firewood and coal shop. As I needed coal for the water-boiler, I entered the shop. Sitting on a wooden bench behind the huge weighing scales was an old man. His face was wrinkled, his moustache drooped, thick glasses framed his face and a handkerchief was tied around his head. His face looked familiar. On closer scrutiny he turned out to be Deshpandemaster of Ghodnadi!

I touched his feet and addressed him as Kaka, just as I used to do as a child in Ghodnadi. ‘Kaka, I’m Balu. Kharemaster’s daughter. From Ghodnadi.’ He stared at me through his thick lenses. ‘Do you recognize me?’

‘Oh, yes! You’re the one who used to hide behind your mother saying you had a tummy ache when I would come to teach you. Right?’

I broke into a smile. That’s me all right! Only a few decades older. But, Kaka why are you sitting here in a corner?’

‘At this age, Balu, usually all your companions have left you. Only these logs of wood wait for you, to bid you farewell on your final journey. They will also provide all the warmth I will need on that journey.’ HP laughed whimsically. ‘So I sometimes come here to make friends with them!’

This was his way of speaking which used to endear him to Anna. The two had been very close at Ghodnadi. And suddenly I realized that Kaka would be able to fill in many details about Anna. I asked him, ‘Kaka have you heard the sad news? Anna passed away.’

‘Oh! is that so?’ he responded easily. ‘Well, one chapter is over.’ He rose and we started to leave. For a while we were both silent. Then he spoke to himself. ‘He was a good man.’

‘Kaka, I’m thinking of writing Anna’s life story. Will you help me?’

‘Yes. Ill gladly do that.’ He halted and leant on his stick. ‘But when you say you’ll write his life story, what do you mean? Will you put him on a pedestal? Make him out to be a God?’

I didn’t respond. We continued walking. He said, ‘Look here Balu, it’s true that Anna was a good man, but like others, he was made of flesh and blood. Can you keep that in mind when you write? Some will call him “good”, others will vilify him. At Ghodnadi, Shankar, the goldsmith, had not one good word to say about him. Will you have the strength and judgement to sift through the truths and the untruths? Annamaster had one great quality, he had an alert, watchful mind. He had no illusions about himself. When you write about him, forget that you are his daughter. Look at him as you would at anyone outside your family, say a long-time neighbour. If you’re ready to do that, come to me, ask what you will. I’ll gladly tell you.’

I saw Kaka to his home. On the way to Aai’s, I began thinking about what he had said- Write about Anna and forget the closeness of our relationship! Look at him like an outsider? That would mean placing him among other people, in the conditions in which he grew up. That means, things would have to be imagined on the basis of the history of those times, characters and situations would have to be conjured up. In short, I would have to resort to writing fiction. Well, what was wrong in that? I remembered having read somewhere that a novel was history poured out of the mould of molten imagination. So I would sketch out Anna’s life more like a novel. Freely mixing fact and fiction. With these thoughts, I began writing.

#### *four*

The bullock cart reached Ghodnadi one warm Saturday in the month of Chaitra. On the journey, Indutai looked eagerly at everything around her; Kharemaster was preoccupied, wondering where they would find shelter for the night. He asked the *gariwallah* to halt the cart at the beginning of an alley, got down and looked around. A bearded man was washing his cow in the alley. Kharemaster asked, ‘Is there any place where we can stay tonight?’

‘Where are you people from?’ the man asked in Hindi, caressing his beard.

‘We’ve come from Bombay.’

‘Are you Brahmins?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah! Then go ask at the Ram Mandir.’ He came to the cart and pointed out the Ram temple six or seven houses down. They’ll be able to help you. You can take your cart right up to the mandir.’ Kharemaster directed the gariwallah to the temple and unloaded their belongings on the temple steps. Indutai got down, holding her *sari-padar* securely over her head. Just then a bare-chested man appeared, playing with his sacred thread, a symbol of his Brahmin caste, around his neck.

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Khare.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘We’re from Bombay.’

‘Whom are you looking for?’

‘I don’t know anyone. We’ve just arrived. My job brings me here. And I need a place to stay right away.’

You see that vacant house right across? That’s mine. Do you want it? But, you’re Brahmins, aren’t you—?’

‘Oh, yes. We are Brahmins all right. Our surname is Khare. We are high caste Chitpavans from Konkan.’

‘All right then, see if the house suits you.’

‘May I know whom I’m addressing?’

‘I’m Tatyabhatji. I’m the priest at this temple.’ His wife, Gopikabai, peered over his shoulder. He pointed to the house. Gopikabai came to talk to Indutai and escorted her to the house. The house was spacious, with three large rooms and a big courtyard at the back. One corner of the yard had a stone platform for washing clothes, in the other was the latrine; the courtyard itself was large enough so that the clothes could be hung to dry. It was much better than the place in Bombay. Kharemaster and Indutai both liked it.

‘I like the place. But what about the rent?’

‘Four annas a month.’

Kharemaster felt that was reasonable. He looked around. ‘From where do we get our water?’ he asked.

‘There’s a well nearby.’

Tatyabhatji asked Gopikabai to show them the well. She asked Indutai to follow her. The well was deep with steps leading down to the water. The water in the well looked very clean; the last two steps that were submerged in the water could be seen. This is called a store well,’ Gopikabai informed Indutai. ‘Only we Brahmin women use it. There is a large storage tank behind the Ram temple. There you can bathe, and wash your clothes. And, do come and have a simple meal of *pithla bhat* with us in the evening.’

Kharemaster and Indutai swept and cleaned their new home. They washed up at the tank. Just then Gopikabai reappeared and reminded them, ‘Now, don’t forget to come and take your evening meal with us.’



We'll be there, Gopikabai,' responded Indutai gratefully. I'll just try to get this place in order.' When they finished setting up the new home, they brought two full pots of drinking water from the store well, and then went to Tatyabhat's home for their evening meal.

There are only six or seven Brahmin families permanently settled in Ghodnadi,' Tatya narrated, as they ate. 'Of course other Brahmins such as the schoolteacher, the revenue officer, and the police officer come and go as they get transferred.' Kharemaster and Indutai listened carefully as they enjoyed the simple yet delicious meal. Tatya continued, 'Have you looked around the town yet? You know that wide road behind our house? There's a masjid at the end of it Take a look around tomorrow.'

When they returned home, they spread their mattresses, and fell asleep instantly, tired from the long day. Kharemaster was awakened at dawn by the sounds of the *baang* from the masjid. He had never heard the *baang* before. Indutai woke up, lit a fire in the three-stoned *chullah* in the courtyard using the twigs and sticks they had swept up the previous day, and heated the bath water. She made tea. Both bathed. From time to time, they heard the temple bell as it was rung by worshippers going in and out of the Ram temple. Then the church bell tolled, calling the congregation to the service. 'This Ghodnadi seems to be a confluence of three religions,' Kharemaster observed to himself.

Kharemaster was, of course, well acquainted with Brahmins and Konkanis. And in Bombay he had become aware that there were many different castes. Since only Brahmins lived in his chawl, "there had been no occasion to interact with people from other castes. The superintendent of the drawing school that he had attended in Bombay was a Christian, but Kharemaster did not know much about him or about his religion. As for the Muslims, Kharemaster had never even seen one. Kharemaster had read about the fierce battle between the British and the Marathas that had taken place in Ghodnadi in 1815. At that time the Muslim sardars had fought on the side of the Marathas.

In Ghodnadi, some of these Muslim sardars lived at either end of the Brahmin enclave in large homes with whitewashed walls, the size of the houses a testimony to their status as sardars. Other Muslims, like Umarhayat Khan, Tayar Khan and Bukharali, also lived nearby. Bright green parrots in cages hung outside their homes, the parrots a symbol of their lavish lifestyle. Bamboo curtains screened the front of the Muslim homes. Kharemaster learnt for the first time that Muslim women lived in protective seclusion and never left home without burkhas. He was puzzled at how they could spend their lives like this. With his limited formal education, Kharemaster knew little about history. Later, through the discourses of Raosaheb Rege and Agashemaster, he became aware of the assaults on the Hindu religion. He wondered what the situation in Ghodnadi would be and what exactly the Christian religion preached.

It was a beautiful Sunday morning. Kharemaster was supposed to report to the Principalsaheb outside the church after the service.

He set off for the church, which was very near, on the Pune-Ahmednagar road. There was no one in sight, so Kharemaster waited outside the church. The saheb, accompanied by his wife, appeared after the service was over. Kharemaster was worried how he would converse with the saheb, since he himself spoke no English. But the saheb asked him in Marathi, 'Are you Mister Khare?'

‘Yes.’ Kharemaster bowed slightly. The saheb shook his hand. Kharemaster was astonished by the whiteness of his skin and by his use of Marathi. He had never met a white man before. He heard the softness of the saheb’s tone. Tomorrow is Monday. The school starts at eight in the morning. Come directly to the drawing school. You will have to teach both in the morning and the evening.’ Kharemaster noticed the slight accent in the saheb’s Marathi. After the saheb and his wife left, a dozen or so Christians, including some children, came out of the church and departed homewards.

Kharemaster realized that he would have to work under this white man. He remembered the arguments between Raosaheb Rege and Agashe. Would this white missionary, he wondered, be on the side of the British?

The news that there were new Brahmin tenants in Talyabhatji’s house spread quickly through the Brahmin enclave, which had barely half a dozen houses. The other Brahmins there were all Deshastha, hailing from the non-coastal belt; and they sensed that Kharemaster and Indutai were different. The women of their households adorned their hair with traditional gold ornaments such as moodh and agraphul, and tied it in a khopa. Indutai rolled her hair in a bun. The *kumkum tikkas* on their forehead were shaped like a crescent moon, or were horizontal stripes, or very large circles, while Indutai wore a small round tikka. So some of (he ladies surmised that she must belong to either the Shenvi or Prabhu caste. They would slyly ask her if that was so. Indutai thought it rather strange. Here she was, a pure Konkanastha Brahmin. Why were these women asking her such strange questions?

Kharemaster’s school in the barracks began at eight in the morning. The barracks were five or six furlongs outside the town. This was the place where the British soldiers used to be quartered. They were called *baraki* in the local slang. Later those barracks fell into disuse, so the missionaries used the premises for their school. The school had a drawing class, as well as classes in woodwork and metalwork. Kharemaster began his classes. He met Gangarammaster, one of the teachers. Gangarammaster taught in the workshop and also did some administrative work at the school. Kharemaster taught drawing. There were hardly ten or fifteen students, divided amongst three classes. Slowly, over a six-month period the number of students began increasing. Kharemaster was curious about how that had happened and from where these students came. He realized as he was teaching them that many of his students did not understand the simplest of words. When he shared this with Gangarammaster, the latter said, ‘How can they understand? They have been kept ignorant for generations. Their brains have rusted completely.’

Then why don’t they go to school?’ asked Kharemaster. ‘School!’ Gangarammaster scoffed at the word. Then he related this story: ‘A Mang boy—a boy from the very lowest caste—was bent on learning, and began attending the local school. Being a Mang, he was not allowed to sit in the class, but was made to sit outside the door. He was unhappy but he put up with the insult. He paid close attention from the outside, listening to what the teacher said. Faithfully he copied everything the teacher put on the board and carefully solved all the arithmetic problems. The teacher would accept the slates from the hands of the other students, but never from this boy. Instead, he would scream at this boy to place his slate on the floor. The boy would obey, shivering with fear. Other students were routinely caned when their answers were incorrect but this boy was never caned. Instead, the teacher would slam the edge of the slate into his stomach so hard that the boy

would writhe in pain. Soon the boy stopped coming to the school. Then one day, persuaded by the white missionary, he converted to Christianity. Now he is a regular student at the mission school. He's very bright.'

Kharemaster said nothing, but was deeply disturbed. Suddenly he was faced with many new issues. He saw the existence of three religions at Ghodnadi. Several years ago, the Muslims had attacked Ghodnadi and had converted many Hindus. Were the missionaries also converting Hindus? Didn't the Hindus fight back? No, they probably just followed their caste customs. The students in that Christian school were a constant reminder to Kharemaster that the Hindu religion had lost many of its own children due to sheer neglect and callousness.

The Brahmins in the neighbourhood generally gathered at Nathbhatji's house. There, on his verandah, they played all sorts of games. Sometimes they played card games using hand-painted *ganjiphas*—traditional playing-cards; at other times they played *chausar*. Kharemaster went there simply to while away the time. He had no interest in these games. The Brahmins were curious about Kharemaster's teaching in a Christian school. They were very inquisitive and pelted him with questions. Did he bathe again to purify himself after returning from the school every day? Was he required to attend church on Sundays? But not one showed concern that so many Hindus were being converted. Through their gossip, Kharemaster learnt what had happened.

One day, a couple of years ago, a white man had strolled through the town, smiling as he twirled his cane. The villagers eyed him warily. He smiled, said, 'Good Morning,' and raised his hand in salam. He spoke to them in Marathi. Everyone thought he was an agent of the British rulers. No one knew whence he came or where he stayed, what he did. The womenfolk washing their clothes on the riverbank could see this man walk through the *basti* on the other side of the river, where the untouchables lived. No one had any idea why he did that. Soon after that, the church was constructed next to the town, on the Pune-Ahmednagar main road. This white saheb and his wife went to the church every morning. Gradually, a few of the untouchables also began attending the church. Then it became clear that the white man's purpose was to convert the poor riverside dwellers to Christianity.

Kharemaster heard this story and was puzzled. Why didn't the others show any concern for what had happened? Why hadn't they discussed its implications? He grew very uneasy. He understood now why the number of children in the missionary school was increasing. In Bombay, in Raosaheb Rege's company, Kharemaster had been exposed to many new issues. Now Kharemaster was besieged by this one question: Why were people attracted to the Muslim and Christian religions?

Often, in the morning, as Kharemaster walked to school, he would see Bukharali washing his cow. Bukharali and Kharemaster were very well acquainted by then. Kharemaster was, somehow, surprised to see Bukharali's affection for his cow, and told him so. Bukharali replied with a smile, 'Masterji, we were Hindus originally, after all.' Although he admitted this, he practised his own religion rigidly. He went to the masjid every afternoon to say the namaz, as did the Muslims in the surrounding neighbourhoods. The Christians, of course, held services in the church every Sunday. Kharemaster grappled with many new questions: Does community prayer strengthen the religious bond and bring people together? Why don't we Hindus do the same, he thought? Why not

fix one day for common prayer, as he had seen at the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay? What was the role of religion? Was it to bring together people with a communal bond, or to foster individual spirituality? Was merging one's ego with the community at these regular prayers one way of spiritual upliftment? Every morning, on the way to the barracks, he would pass both the church and the masjid; each time these questions rushed to the fore.

One day when the group had gathered at Nathbhatji's, Kharemaster raised this topic. 'We Hindus should gather regularly in the temple.' Then the group began pelting him with questions.

'Who among the Hindus?'

'All the castes.'

The untouchables too? in the temple? In one place?'

To come together? For what?'

'Let's just say, to pray.'

'But each one worships a different God. Which deity should we pray to in the temple?'

'Pray? In which language?'

Kharemaster could not think of answers to these questions. He remained silent.

The basti where the untouchables lived was on the lower slopes near the village. Kharemaster used to see it every day on his way to and from the barracks. One day, on his way home, he was overcome with curiosity and entered this area. He shuddered as he saw abject poverty and the resulting filth surrounding the huts. He then visited another basti a little further, on the banks of the river. He recoiled in disgust! Puddles of waste water and piles of stinking garbage dotted the landscape. Pigs and their young ones rooted in the garbage, spraying it around. Little children played in the dirt nearby and added human excreta to all the filth.

In Bombay, at Rege's house, in newspaper offices and columns and in the Prarthana Samaj mandir, Kharemaster had heard a lot about the need for social reform. But never had he found any reference to these poor untouchables as part of his society. No one had given any thought to the fact that their lot needed to be improved. Not one had ever spoken on their behalf. Then, listening to their woes, paying heed to their grief, finding solutions to their innumerable problems was out of the question. And, since these poor people were neglected by the upper castes, they could not even appeal to the ultimate authority in the temple. God, too, was denied to them by the Brahmins, as even the temples were out of bounds for them.

How, Kharemaster wondered, had that immaculately dressed white man walked around in this filthy area? What had he told them? He must have asked those poor, uneducated people to give themselves to Jesus. And he had probably promised them (hat Jesus would feed them, clothe them and if they fell ill, he would cure them. Jesus would give them knowledge and teach them. The white man had probably repeated this, over and over, till he had convinced them. These uneducated people knew Kama, Vithoba, Shankar, Krishna, Jakhaai, Jokhaai and Mariaai. They did not know who Jesus, the Son of God, was, and so they had accepted what the white man said.

The basti had begun responding to the saheb's daily visits. This immaculate white man, who never shouted, 'Don't touch, don't touch', slowly won the poor people over. Soon his wife began accompanying him. She would minister to the women and children and give them medicines.

Gradually, one or two of the untouchables agreed to join the white man's flock. Over the next three or four years, seven or eight of them became Christians, and began attending the church. Slowly, their daily habits changed. One of the converts was Gangarammaster. He was now a respected teacher in the Mission School. His two daughters, Chandrakour and Ratnaprabha, were about sixteen or seventeen. They were studying in the English school, which was located next to the memsaheb's dispensary. They were as yet unmarried but among the Christians this was not unusual. Kharemaster mulled over this: Would unmarried girls of that age be found in Hindu society? Not so, he realized, when society insisted that girls should get married even before they were eight!

And then Kharemaster was worried. What if he incurred the wrath of the Brahmins by his walking through the basti of the untouchables? Moreover, what if the school children reported his activities to the big saheb? His very job would be in jeopardy. He was caught in a real bind. On the one hand he was ashamed of his cowardice, and on the other he was pained by the attitude of his own people.

Even the Ghodnadi River had become sullied by the poison of caste distinction. The higher castes used to fetch their water from the upper banks of the Ghodnadi, the middle castes from the lower banks, and the untouchables from the very lowest banks. Later, to provide water for all the townspeople, the municipality had sunk a deep well, pumped the water and stored it in a large tank, and disbursed it to each locality. Marutrao Rayate was in charge of this project. Now water was freely available to all, both in the morning and in the evening. But there too, caste distinctions were practised. . If a woman from a middle caste used the facility, the higher caste woman would 'purify' the tap by sprinkling water around it before placing her pot under it. The wife of the jeweller would try to show she was higher by doing the same, even if a higher caste Brahmin woman had filled her pot first. The untouchables did not even dare to come near the tap. These ladies who practised caste distinctions were completely oblivious of the fact that Marutrao, who had arranged the water disbursement, was of a low caste. Kharemaster was astonished by this. He repeatedly told Indutai not to practise this stupid 'purification'.

One day, as he passed by the tap, he saw Indutai 'sprinkling water' on the tap. When Indutai came home with the water, he warned her not to do so again. Indutai halted on her way into the house and said, 'You ask me not to sprinkle water, and there at the tap both the higher caste and the lower caste women are shouting at me to do so. What do you expect me to do?'

Indutai had, so far, never answered back. He looked at her present stance and replied, 'All right, you do whatever suits you.' He remembered that when Indu had refused to learn the alphabet, he had threatened to send her back to her parents. She had been completely taken aback and had agreed to learn. Till today his word had been law. He had thought of himself as the master of all he surveyed. But that was clearly not so any longer.

He realized that he had taken Indu for granted. He had not noticed that she worked very hard all day long. She took very good care of him, and remembered all the little

things that pleased him. Now, hereafter, he decided, he must also be sensitive to her. Indutai had brought all the family idols to Ghodnadi with her. She performed the puja ritual faithfully. Although Kharemaster did not believe in worshipping idols, he did not express his disapproval.

He consciously changed his attitude and behaviour towards Indutai. He was then about twenty-six and had graduated fully into manhood. The nine-year-old girl who had entered his life was now about sixteen and had blossomed into womanhood. Desire for her stirred in him, but a strange reluctance held him back. He remembered what had happened to Thaki in Bombay. Thaki was Indutai's age and was completely innocent in matters of sex. On the night of her *garbhadhan*—the consummation ceremony—she fainted with fright and was bedridden for several days. Indutai had already reached puberty while they were in Bombay. So his mother had arranged for the consummation ceremony according to custom.

In those days, in Maharashtra, a great debate raged over the Age of Consent Bill. A bill was being considered to provide that if the woman was younger than twelve, the husband should not have sexual relations with her. If he did so he could be convicted and sentenced for life. Raosaheb Rege and his friends were fighting for the passage of this bill. In Madhavbag in Bombay, thousands attended meetings, protesting this law. In Pune, Agarkar and his group were agitating that the law be enacted. Kharemaster pushed aside his mother's plans and flatly refused the performance of this rite.

At Ghodnadi, however, they were just the two of them. Khare-master's passions were aroused whenever he looked at Indu. But she had such an innocent look about her, that he would be reminded of the Thaki episode. He was worried that if he were overeager, Indu would be frightened and lost to him forever. How could this girl be so unaware of the relationship between a husband and a wife? Was it possible that women did not have any instinct for sex?

Although she was innocent in such matters, he realized that in running the household, Indu was by far his better half. It was Indutai who had made this house into a home. For the first few days, he paid close attention to all the domestic details, but soon felt that he was ignorant about many things. He didn't know what the vegetables were called, whether they were fresh or not, what quantity should be bought—he had to bow to Indutai's judgement in many such matters. This had a beneficial impact. Indu lost her diffidence and gained confidence. Kharemaster began slipping off his pedestal.

A natural occurrence that helped to remove the barrier between them was Indutai's menstrual period. In those days, during her menstrual cycle, a woman actually had to sit outside the house, like an outcaste. For those three days of impurity, she was forbidden to do any of the household chores. Naturally, the man of the house had to shoulder these responsibilities. Who else would bring drinking water, cook the meals and perform the household chores? Kharemaster hadn't faced this problem in Bombay, since Aai had been there to manage the house. But the first time that Indutai had her period at Ghodnadi, Kharemaster was in deep trouble. He had to sweep, cook, and wash the clothes and dishes, before he left for school at eight! He rebelled! And took recourse to questioning this practice of periodic abstinence from work. 'Forget this taboo and carry on as usual,' he told Indutai. But she opposed the idea. 'In the Brahmin circles we will become outcastes. Shall I ask Gopikabai to make a simple meal of bhaji and bhakri for

us?’ But as there were frequent differences of opinion with the priest’s family, Kharemaster didn’t like taking his help in such times of trouble. So he braced himself and tried to do all the chores. After he had swept up the house, he went to fill water at the communal tap. Seeing that a man had come, the women at the tap stood aside. But when Kharemaster began filling his *ghagar* without the required ‘purification’, the women began whispering amongst themselves. Kharemaster was taken aback. For the first time he learnt how difficult it was to practise what one preached.

Although he had been accustomed to doing housework under Phatakمامi’s guidance, he had never cooked a meal before. Now that he was cooking under Indutai’s tutelage, his male ego was further threatened. Each time he had to ask her advice. ‘How much salt should I add? Is this much chilli powder right? How do I give the *phodni*?’ And, as Indutai could not enter the kitchen during those days, each time he had to ask her a question he had to go to her, where she stood, outside the door. She would answer him, cover her mouth with her sari padar and giggle. And after all this, when the cooking was done, he had to serve her the meal outside, and serve himself in the kitchen.

With the first mouthful, both would realize that either there was too much salt or too little, the spices were all wrong and both would break out into laughter. All this served to bring them closer together, make them more each other’s equals. Slowly, Kharemaster began cooking without direction. On the fourth day, he had to purify Indutai by pouring a bucket of water on her. The sight of her body, through her wet clothes was, he felt, his reward for three days of hard work.

Two years had gone by since their arrival in Ghodnadi. Kharemaster had truly become a Ghodnadikar, heart and soul. The Brahmins were a little in awe of him. His innate curiosity, progressive attitude, and well-rounded personality came through in all that he said. And because he was gregarious, had a keen sense of humour and was always ready to lend a helping hand to anyone in need, he was sought after by the simple village folk. But he felt he was being stifled intellectually. At Guhagar, people had few things to talk about. In the chawl in Bombay, too, the topics of conversation had been very limited. But with Raosaheb Rege, Kharemaster’s desire to explore other worlds had been fulfilled. He had been exposed to many new ideas which had given him much food for thought.

Kharemaster’s longing for stimulating conversation drew him to Nathbhatji’s front porch, the meeting place for the educated in that village. Nathbhatji himself, hardly read anything. He performed all sorts of pujas, reciting Sanskrit *slokas* by heart. Although he didn’t have any idea of their meaning, the simple villagers, especially the womenfolk, were very impressed. They came to him for advice on ritual fasting, on pujas to be performed and to get their horoscopes read; and paid him handsomely. He felt important and his ego was satisfied. But the only talk that went on in his circle was malicious gossip, ill-bred nosiness and idle chatter. Kharemaster used to listen without comment. He felt there was nothing to be gained by arguing with them. But when this became too much for him, he would go off by himself, lost as usual in thought.

Kharemaster liked this little town. Although it had only ten thousand people, it was rich in its diversity. The beauty of the town was enhanced by the river nearby. The entire town was made up of only three parallel roads, with houses on both sides. Early each morning, the women of the households sprinkled water in front of each house to settle the dust; then each doorstep was decorated with simple yet graceful rangoli designs.

Kharemaster breathed in the clean and fresh air as he walked to school in the morning and his spirits were lifted.

Kharemaster especially liked the way the different neighbourhoods were mixed in Ghodnadi. Unlike Guhagar and Bombay, here there was no obvious separation by religion or caste. The Muslim area was next to that of the Brahmins, On the other side of the Brahmins were the Sonar, Shimpi, Kasar, Vanjaris and other castes. Even the houses of worship seemed to dwell happily, side by side. The Muslims had their masjid, the mission its church, and four or five Hindu temples, those of Rama, Vithobha, and Radha Krishna were spread around the town; the temple of Shani was near the river. Even in those times there was a girls' school up to the second standard and a boys' school up to the seventh standard.

One day, Kharemaster happened to be passing by the boys' school as the pupils were being let out at the close of the day. He fell into easy conversation with a teacher coming out of that school. The teacher's name was Dinkar Deshpande. As they chatted, Kharemaster realized that this man was different from the other villagers. A man after his own heart. Deshpandemaster asked, 'Where do you work? What do you do here?'

'I teach art at the Mission School.'

Deshpandemaster stopped in his tracks and exclaimed, 'Art! That's wonderful! You know how to bring colour to a drab existence, look at me! All I do is keep track of the debits and credits of day to day living.'

Kharemaster saw the wit in Deshpandemaster's words. 'How is it that I've not met you before?'

'Oh, I've just been transferred to Ghodnadi from Manchar. My family is not even here yet. I came ahead to look for a house.'

'Oh, so you are replacing Jadhavmaster.'

'Yes, in fact I'm going to live in his house.'

'That's good. We'll run across each other often.'

'True! You know, yesterday as I wandered around, I noticed just half a dozen Brahmin houses, and thought that there's just a handful of us. Then I walked through the town and realized that there are thousands of us. One can forget one's loneliness in a crowd. Isn't that so?'

Deshpandemaster's words made Kharemaster feel he had at long last found a kindred spirit. They walked homewards. As they parted, both said, 'Let's meet again.'

Their meetings became frequent Deshpandemaster was an avid reader, with a large collection of books. One day Kharemaster commented, 'What kind of a place is this! Not one person gets *Kesari*,

'Oh, yes, a few people do. Saonkar Nagarkar, the mamledar, even Fouzdar Deshmukh across from you gets it.'

Kharemaster said happily, I didn't know that. I'll ask to borrow a copy tomorrow.'

'No, no, please don't.'

'Why?'



They are government servants. If it is known that they get *Kesari* produced by a freedom-fighter like Tilak—.'

Then how do they get it?'

'Secretly. In the wife's name, But if they loan it out to others, everyone will find out.'

Kharemaster began subscribing to *Kesari* by paying four annas a month to the tongawallah who brought the mail from Pune. Then, on the way to the school and back, he used to read the newspaper he had hidden in his pocket.

Bouts of morning sickness made the first month of Indutai's pregnancy very difficult. Kharemaster was very uneasy when he saw how she suffered and felt guilty thinking that he was the one responsible for her suffering. He was not sure how long Indutai would be able to cope with the housework in her condition. Kashibai, the wife of Deshpandemaster, was very supportive. Kharemaster helped Indutai as much as possible. When her morning sickness abated after a month, Indutai did not let Kharemaster do any more of the housework. Kashibai concurred, 'Let her do as much work as she can. The more active a woman is in her pregnancy, the better it is for her.' Kharemaster wanted to hire a maid, but Indutai would not let him.

The first delivery traditionally took place at one's mahar. Indutai agreed to hire a maid only when, in the eighth month of her pregnancy, it was time for Kharemaster to take her to Awaas. Kashibai and Deshpandemaster reassured Indutai that Kharemaster would take his meals with them for the three months of Indutai's absence. But both were embarrassed. Three months?' Kashibai and Deshpandemaster said, 'Will you feel better if you pay us? All right, then pay us one rupee per month. Is that all right?' And the problem of Kharemaster's meals was solved. Kashibai came every day, helped Indutai, and gave her advice based on her own experience. One day she said, 'Well sew all the clothes the baby needs. Ill teach you.'

Kharemaster said, 'But are they for a baby boy or a girl?'

Deshpandemaster laughed out aloud. 'Kharemaster, both boys and girls use the same things, a cloth to cover their bottoms, bibs to catch their drooling, gowns and caps.'

Kharemaster simply smiled. A little later Deshpandemaster asked, 'Have you made a list?'

'What list?'

'A list of names for a boy.'

Kashibai interrupted, 'We've already decided. If it's a boy, we'll name him "Narayan".'

Kharemaster asked, 'Why's that?'

'Because of the Narayan temple at your Guhagar.'

'Let's see if we have a son.'

'What do you mean? It definitely will be a boy. A fortune-teller has read her palm and said so.'

Kharemaster asked mischievously, 'Oh, is that so? How much money did this *gyotishi* take to say it would be a boy?'

Indutai replied, 'Not one paisa. I showed him my hand only because he said he'd take no money.'

Kharemaster knew that Indutai really wanted a son, yet he teased, 'And if it's a girl?'

Deshpandemaster said, 'Then there is no problem with the name. All the rivers, Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Krishna, Kaveri are waiting for their names to be used.'

Kharemaster said, 'Then we have a name right at hand. Let's give her the name of our own river, "Ghodnadi".' They all laughed.

Two months later a letter came from Awaas with the news that Indutai had given birth to a baby girl. Both mother and child were doing well. Kharemaster heaved a sigh of relief. But the group gathered at Nathbhatji's sniggered, 'We thought we'd get delicious *pedhe* for a boy, not just grains of sugar for a girl!' 'But I did want a girl,' insisted Kharemaster. Ramubhat said, 'Kharemaster, no matter what you say, a boy's a boy and a girl's a girl.'

Kharemaster brought Indutai and baby Manorama back to Ghodnadi from Awaas. Little Manu was the apple of his eye, the very centre of his existence. He could not bear it if she was even slightly unwell. Indutai too guarded Manu with her life. For minor illnesses Kashitai had a host of kitchen remedies. Manutai benefited from both Kashitai's generosity and her experience, and Manu was as a result, a happy, contented baby.

Manu began crawling, then standing. Kharemaster and Indutai were besides themselves with delight when she made her first sounds, 'ma', and 'pa'. She began talking when she was two years old. Kharemaster used to carry her around on his shoulder, and he would walk her in the garden and pat her to sleep. He used to play all kinds of silly games with her, saying 'one two, one two' to her, over and over again. Soon Manu began repeating 'one two, one two', to herself. Then he began to sing a song for her:

One two three four, Clever Manu is at the door.

Manu began lisping the song. Within a month, she could count from one to ten.

Kharemaster took great pride in each step of Manu's development. In those days one rupee fetched twelve to fifteen seers of grain. Even after the household expenses had been met, there was money left over, out of the thirty-rupee pay. Kharemaster ordered a gold *bindli* for Manu's hair from the sonar; Indutai had already received gold bangles—the traditional *gate* and *patlya*. Baby Manu also got many new frocks and caps and underpants. In those days, little girls did not wear such underpants, so when Indutai took Manu, all dressed up to Nagarkar Saonkar's for the *haldikunku* ceremony, the ladies there clustered around them and asked Indutai nosy questions. When Kharemaster petted the little one, Deshpandemaster would tease him, 'Kharemaster, don't get too attached to your daughter. Don't forget, one day she will belong to another.' Then Kharemaster would look at his daughter. Would this child, who clung to him calling out 'Anna, Anna,' leave him one day, to go to a stranger? The very thought was unbearable.

Just two years later, Indutai was expecting again. This brought Kharemaster abruptly down to earth. He realized that he had a family to look after. He escorted Indutai and Manu to Awaas, for the delivery. On the way back, just like the last time, he stopped to

pay his respects to Phatakrama and Phatakmani and visited Raosaheb Rege. So, for a brief moment, he was drawn out of his purely domestic concerns and was made cognizant of the political happenings around him.

Lord Curzon, the acting Governor-General at that time, had insolently divided Bengal into two parts, to make it easier for the British to govern. Most patriots felt that this separation of a largely Muslim populated area had been done to create a division between the Hindus and the Muslims. As a result, a blazing fire of discontent raged through Bengal that later spread to the rest of India. The action of the government was decried through the medium of the newspaper, through public meetings and through huge processions. 'Boycott British goods' was the cry that resounded through the land.

The atmosphere in Pune was seething with political discontent when Kharemaster arrived there on his way to Ghodnadi. On his way to the Ghodnadi tonga-stand, he saw a huge procession. Two respected leaders of Pune—Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the editor of *Kesari* and Shivram Pant Paranjpe, the editor of *Kaal* were at its head. A frenzied crowd followed them, vociferously shouting, 'Boycott British goods.' The crowd threw away articles of foreign clothing and showered red *gulal* on the two bullock carts which carried those articles in the procession. Like a corpse being taken to the funeral pyre, the people of Pune were taking these clothes to burn them in 'Holi'. This idea of 'Holi' was conceived and then put into practice throughout the land initially by Savarkar, who was a young college student at the time. He was urging people to participate in the boycott. Kharemaster stayed back in Pune that day, took part in the procession and went to see the 'Holi' on the river banks. He was enthralled by the rousing speeches of Tilak, Paranjpe and Savarkar, speeches more brilliant than the leaping flames of the- burning clothes. It was in just that frame of mind that he returned to Ghodnadi.

Now the boycott became Kharemaster's only obsession. He would tell Deshpandemaster, over and over again, that they must also support the boycott. He raised the issue again at Nathbhatji's that night and suggested that the villagers should boycott foreign clothes. He described vividly the dominance of the British, the partition of Bengal, and the bonfire of British articles in Pune. He had heard several marching songs in the Pune procession. Spiritedly he repeated those lines to his group.

The half-dozen men gathered at Nathbhatji's heard this in spellbound silence. Kharemaster's fervour had been infectious and he felt that he had convinced all. Then Rambhat said in a serious tone, 'Kharemaster, you say that the white rulers have partitioned Bengal, but where is Bengal? And how does it concern us?'

Dhondbhat said, 'You say we shouldn't wear foreign clothes. Fine! But even if we don't, how will it hurt the British?'

Kharemaster began explaining calmly. The white man buys cotton from us at a very low price, takes it to his country, spins it into yarn and makes clothes out of it. Then he brings the clothes here and sells them at an inflated price. He makes a huge profit at our expense. If we don't buy his clothes, we will have taught him a lesson and he will have to listen to our demands.' They seemed to understand what Kharemaster said. Then Nathbhatji said, 'Let's do this. We'll call all the people in this neighbourhood to the Ram temple and there *you* preach this boycott bit to the people. Instead of just a half dozen of us getting involved, it will be much more effective if a hundred or so do. Isn't that right, Kharemaster?'

Although this was a sound idea, Kharemaster was a little taken aback at the new responsibilities being thrust on him. 'Let me think about it and I'll let you know,' he said as he got up to leave.

At night, as usual he went to Deshpandemaster's house for his evening meal. Deshpandemaster asked him, 'So, when are you speaking at the Ram temple?'

'Speaking? On what?'

'What do you mean? You're giving a public lecture on "boycott" in the temple, aren't you?'

'Who told you that?'

'I ran into Fouzdar Deshmukh. He told me.'

'Fouzdar Deshmukh? How did he know?'

That's just what his job is. To find out about all the activities against the government.'

Kharemaster was silent. Hardly two hours had passed since his return from Nathbhatji's! And already the news had spread to the fouzdar! He said to Deshpandemaster, 'I've been terribly restless ever since my visit to Pune the other day. I feel I must do something.'

'Look here. You have a wife, a daughter and another child on the way. You work for a white man. There is nothing to protect your job and there is no one to whom you can appeal. You have to depend on the saheb's goodwill. If that's gone you're finished. If you stab him in the back, why would he show you any mercy?'

Kharemaster ate in silence for a while, but he was dejected. After some time he whispered, 'In Bombay, I knew some really great people. They were all committed to their country and to the people. So I used to feel that I too must play my part.'

'Who were these people?'

'Raobahadur Mahadeo Govind Ranade came regularly to the Prarthana Samaj. Sometimes Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar and Justice Narayan Chandavarkar would also be seen there. Once, with Raosaheb Rege, I saw Justice K. T. Telang. And I have also heard of Deshmukh, the philanthropist who used to write under the pseudonym "Lokahitwadi", which in fact meant "one working for the good of the people". And, of course, I have been reading a lot about Gopal Ganesh Agarkar since my childhood.'

Deshpandemaster said in a serious tone, 'These are truly great people. Their example should be followed.'

'And yet you say—'

'But one cannot do it half-heartedly. You must become completely like them.'

'What do you mean?'

'Look here Kharemaster, all these people did great things, but without jeopardizing their jobs one bit. Why, even the High Court judges continue to hold their jobs. In fact, Tilak brought this very charge against Agarkar himself that Agarkar first took care of his employment.'

Kharemaster spent a sleepless night. 'I'm a coward,' he thought I talked a lot, but didn't do anything. Is this any way to live?'

He came to a firm decision. So be it. He would not preach any more. He would not ask others to do anything. But wasn't there something he could do on his own, in terms of social reform? If nothing else, could he not raise his daughters, educate them and make them stand on their own feet? That was no small achievement in these times.

Indutai's due date was near. Her parents prayed earnestly for a son and made a vow to have a Satyanarayan puja if a son were born.

Indutai went into labour. Lakhooanna paced up and down in the garden as he waited for the news. Little Manu clung to her grandparents as she had not seen her mother all day. But no one had the peace of mind to play with her. At long last they heard the wail of the newborn. All ears were towards the midwife who came out of the delivery room and said, 'It's a girl. Your daughter is fine.'

Lakhooanna looked devastated. He shook his head dejectedly, "What bad luck!" He was terribly worried how his son-in-law would receive the news; with leaden steps, he paced up and down the front verandah, lost in thought. Manutai tried to cling to him, but he was unmindful of her. Finally she began crying. Indutai's mother came out of the room and let out a sigh.

'It wasn't in our control,' Lakhooanna spoke aloud to himself, 'Two daughters in a row. God only knows what's in store for Indu now!' Aai said, 'Indu has lost heart completely.'

No one said another word. They all shared a common worry. When Khambate's daughter had given birth to two girls in succession, her in-laws had sent her back for good.

At last Lakhooanna spoke. 'Come what may! But we have to let our son-in-law know.' Lakhooanna sent Kharemaster a message about the unfortunate birth of a second daughter saying 'God's will—it will be done.' Indutai was frightened out of her wits about what was in store for her. She could barely say "yes" or "no" in response to any questions asked.

A week later, Kharemaster's letter arrived from Ghodnadi and Lakhooanna was pleased when he read it. He read it out to the rest of the household.

Kharemaster had written, 'I'm very happy with the news of a second daughter. I'm going to educate my daughters. This is good news indeed; the two will be companions. They will study as far as BA or MA—.' Their worries were at rest.

Indutai wept tears of joy.

Soon Kharemaster came to fetch his wife and daughters. Manu-tai shouted in joy, 'My Anna's here', jumped on him and claimed her rightful place on his lap. Kharemaster petted her. 'Manutai, you'll be a graduate won't you?'

Manutai nodded, 'Yessssss!' He asked the baby on Indutai's lap, 'And you?' The three-month old flashed a toothless smile. So he continued, 'Great! This one will be a double graduate.' The family beamed at him.

Kharemaster returned to Ghodnadi with his wife and two little daughters. He said to himself, 'I will limit my reform to my home. I shall teach my daughters. That will be an important step in reforming this society. That will be my goal.' At that time, to send girls to school and that too in a small town, was no mean feat.

Manutai was now two and a half years old and Kharemaster poured his heart and soul into teaching her. He devised all sorts of games to make learning fun. He would ask Manutai, 'Where is Aai?' Manutai would cling to her mother. Then Kharemaster would say, 'That's Aai and this is also A-a-i.' He would write the letters on the slate with a chalk. 'Now show me Aai,' and Manutai would point to both her mother and the word on the slate. Kharemaster would write letters on the slate hold her hand and go over them. Manutai soon learnt to read and write A-a-i. Kharemaster showed her familiar objects which were identified with simple words and wrote the letters for them. Manutai gradually learnt to recognize several characters. Kharemaster bought her a wooden box. Under its lid was a shelf with eight or ten compartments. He filled those with almonds, peppermints, cashews and dates. He used to say, 'Manutai, give me one almond.' Manutai would give him as many as fit in her tiny fist. Then he would say, 'One almond, this is one almond.' Saying so, he would line up all the almonds. Now when he said 'one', Manutai began picking exactly one almond. In a few days Manutai learned the numbers from one to ten. She would parrot this to her younger sister. 'Mathu, take one almond. Mathu take ten almonds.' Then Mathu would crawl over and throw all the almonds in the air. It was difficult to say who enjoyed these games more, Kharemaster or Manutai.

When Manutai was four years old, Kharemaster enrolled her in the girls' school across from the mamledar's house. There were barely hah<sup>1</sup> a dozen students in the school. Some girls were sent to the school as this was a safe place for them to be because their mothers worked in people's homes. Two widows, with barely two years of education, taught in the girls' school. They had refused to be shorn of their hair after they were widowed, against the practice prevalent at that time, and had thus incurred the wrath of the community. In Ghodnadi, widows were traditionally shorn of their hair. Such clean-shaven widows were part of almost every Brahmin household. They had been married at a very early age to much older men and as a result had lost their husbands while they were still very young. Then their entire existence was one of misery and hard work. The girls' teachers had learnt at home and obtained teaching posts but they were hardly fit to teach. Kharemaster realized this. He thought about it and decided to make a bold move. He would enrol Manutai in a boys' school. When the four-year-old Manutai began attending the boys' school, she became the centre of controversy.

The women used to needle Indutai. 'We hear that you've enrolled your daughter in a boys' school!' 'Oh, my God! A boys' school!' They noticed that Manutai was dressed differently than the other Brahmin girls. Their *parkars*—traditional long skirts—were sober, while Manutai's parkars were made of cloth with colourful floral prints. Other girls wore fitted blouses like those worn with saris, Manutai's were loose with puffed sleeves. So even her clothes accentuated the difference between them. Now, not just the Brahmins but the entire Marwari enclave began noticing Manutai. The Brahmin ladies asked Indutai all kinds of questions. She would come home in tears, but Kharemaster was adamant. 'Just ignore them,' he used to say. Then again, as ill Bombay, the question before Indutai was how she would spend her time.

Kharemaster was both creative and enthusiastic. One day he brought home a roll of fine brass wire and silk skeins of many hues. He wove the silk around the wire and showed Indutai how to make a variety of objects such as trees, animals and fruit. One creation was a doll sitting on a bed, which he somehow placed inside a bottle. Women

from all over came to see this unique creation. In their curiosity and wonderment about how he had managed to get the doll inside the bottle, they forgot for a moment their reservations about the family!

Mathu began going to school along with Manutai. The girls followed the same routine every day. Indutai would wake them at six. She'd first scrub their teeth with her fingers; then stand them on the stone platform in the courtyard and bathe them with water that she had heated before they rose. The girls would dress quickly and stand with Kharemaster before the family altar. They repeated a children's prayer after him. At the end, they would touch their parents' feet, asking for their blessings.

Then Kharemaster would take them to the Pune-Ahmednagar road. On the count of 'three', the girls would begin running. They would run a quarter of a furlong and return. This exercise was not without its amusing as well as risky consequences. Once as they ran, they were chased by barking neighbourhood dogs. The girls were petrified and ran as fast as their little legs could carry them. Of course the dogs had no problem keeping up with the girls. As soon as they reached their father, they broke out into sobs. 'We don't want to run ever again,' they pleaded. From the next day, Kharemaster had to find some other place for their athletic adventures.

Indutai invariably greeted them with delicious, hot *arolya* when they returned. This was her speciality—the *arolya* were sweet biscuits, made with fine wheat flour, but fried not baked. The girls ate these with relish, and then it was time to do their homework. Kharemaster left for school at eight so their homework was supervised by Indutai. But as she was busy with her household chores, she could not keep a close watch on them. Manutai and Mathu would use the excuse of having to go to the bathroom, and run out to play with the sparrows chirping outside. They pretended that the sparrows had stolen their slates and books. And they would play on. Soon it would be time to eat and go to school. Then they would suddenly remember that the teacher had asked them to practise writing a page or two. They would then start howling, knowing that the teacher would cane them because the work was not done; Indutai would relent and write out the page or two herself. Since she had also just started writing, her handwriting was as unformed as that of a new student!

The teachers in those days were dedicated, yet very strict. If the students didn't pay attention, they were soundly caned. Girls were spared, but just watching their classmates being caned was enough to make them quake. In the class, Rungtha Shetji's son Badri sat behind Mathu. He was punished almost daily. This used to frighten little Mathu, and whenever Badri cried, she cried too. Then the teacher would yell at her, 'Why are you crying? Am I hitting you?' After school was over, the girls returned home, ate the delicious food Indutai had prepared, and played till it was time for the evening prayer.

As soon as dusk fell, the oil lamps were lit. Manutai and Mathu stood with folded hands before the family idols. Kharemaster recited Tukaram's *abhangs*. The girls listened with rapt attention, mesmerized by the devotion in his musical voice. They repeated the *abhangs* after their father, stanza by stanza, along with several other religious songs from works such as *Bhaktimarg-pradip*, and *Nitishsatak*. Soon they had memorized many verses and could recite these difficult Sanskrit slokas fluently. After the prayer, they recited their multiplication tables and then it was time for the evening meal. A half hour of study and then they were off to bed. Kharemaster insisted on this regimen day after

day. The girls always did well at school. The teachers were full of praise for them. His rigorous approach to the girls' education did not go unnoticed. The group that gathered at Nathbhatji's criticized this at every opportunity, so Kharemaster became reluctant to go there. The differences in their outlook was not restricted to the girls' education; His neighbours criticized him on almost every count.

In addition to his insistence that women must be educated, Kharemaster also came out strongly against caste distinctions. He felt that the spread of the Muslim and Christian religions was a direct consequence of this caste prejudice. When he noticed that the girls came all the way home to drink water when they felt thirsty at school, he asked them instead to go to Kunkubhai's house, which was near the school. Kunkubhai was a Gujarati merchant. He had great respect for Kharemaster. He gladly made separate arrangements for the girls' drinking water. This news of course did not take long to spread.

Once a Mahar—an untouchable—came by with a cord of very good dry wood to sell. As they needed wood, Kharemaster hailed him. They agreed on a price. The pile of wood which he was carrying on his head was very heavy. No Hindu of any caste would touch even the wood which was in physical contact with a Mahar, so he had to find a way of getting down the heavy load. The poor man looked around him for help. Kharemaster understood what the problem was. 'I'll help,' he said. The man hesitated, 'I'm a Mahar.'

Without saying a word, Kharemaster helped with the wood. 'The man was stunned. No Brahmin had ever touched him. He took the money and turned to leave. Kharemaster asked him, 'What's your name?'

'Parshya'.

'Look here, Parshya, will you deliver a cord of wood here every week?'

Parshya agreed happily to do so. He had acquired a permanent customer. But Savitribai had seen this incident and within the hour the news had spread through the neighbourhood. Of course, Indu-tai was the one who had to put up with the taunts, not her husband, yet she said nothing.

A few days later, Manutai was playing in the alley near the house. Indutai was washing clothes on the stone platform in the yard. The wash water ran down the drain into a flowering plant in a pot in the alley. Sonya, who was sweeping the road, was thirsty, and stopped sweeping. As he was a Bhangi, one of the lowest castes, he could not ask just anyone for water. Besides, Sonya was a little half-witted. His nose was streaming; his clothes were so encrusted with dirt that he reeked as he passed by. As soon as he saw water dripping into the pot, he dropped his broom and went to drink the water, cupping his hands. Manutai screamed. 'Sonya, you dirty fellow! Drinking that filthy water?' Sonya spilt the water in fright. Just then Kharemaster appeared in the alley. Manutai called out to him, 'Anna, look at Sonya. He's drinking the dirty water.' Kharemaster came near Manutai and gave her a resounding slap. 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself, just standing here and screaming? Run into the house and bring a *tapeli* of water and give it to Sonya. Sonya, wait a bit.'

Manutai brought a *tapeli* of water from the house and poured it into Sonya's outstretched palm. Sonya drank it gratefully, and left, wiping his mouth. This news, too, spread like wildfire.



The Brahmin community could no longer overlook Kharemaster's unorthodox behaviour. After Indutai filled water at the tap, the women began 'purifying' it. Indutai noticed this and was saddened, but she could not do anything as she was also afraid of incurring Kharemaster's wrath. She began keeping to herself. Kharemaster gradually sensed the anger of the people and realized that they were being treated as outcasts. He began thinking of a way to win these people over.

It was the month of Chaitra. Every household would celebrate the arrival of the goddess Chaitragouri with the traditional haldikunku ceremony, in which married women gathered together to welcome the new year and to wish long life to their husbands. Kunku (a vermillion powder) was symbolic of the woman's husband being alive. Kharemaster said to Indutai, 'This year we will decorate the Chaitragour so beautifully that the whole town will flock to see it.'

The whole town? To our house? I'm not sure that even four women will show up.'

'You'll see.'

Kharemaster was quite excited about this idea that he hoped would help break down the barriers.

'Indu, this year, at the haldikunku let's give everyone *kairichi dal* and *panha*.'

'One or two raw mangoes will be enough to make both the *kairichi dal* and the *panha*,' Indutai said despondently.

'I have something so magical up my sleeve that even a cartload of *kairichi dal* and *panha* will not be enough for the crowd.'

'Anna, Anna, show us your magic.' Manutai-Mathu danced around Anna.

'No, not now, only on the day of the Gouri. Till then help your mother,'

The preparations for decorating the goddess, the Gour, were in full swing. The girls threaded the beads and prepared *torans* which they suspended on the front gate. Indutai and Kharemaster created fish, birds, trees, and animals out of the glass beads. Now it was time to set up the display. In front of the Gour, Kharemaster created a little pond with green grass growing around it. The fish floating in the pond seemed real. Tiny monkeys sat in the trees at the edge of the pond, and more monkeys rested on tiny wooden bedsteads under the trees. In front of the Gour, Kharemaster drew the outlines of animals and birds with white rangoli powder. He taught Indutai and the girls how to fill them with coloured black bukka, red gulal and yellow haldi powders.

Soon the display looked pretty. A green rangoli vine, laden with colourful flowers trailed out of a rangoli flowerpot. Red and pink lotus flowers blossomed around the Gour. Animals and birds coloured with rangoli rested at her feet. Everyone in the house was involved in the preparations. Then the girls set out to give the haldikunku invitations. But long before that, their friends Baki, Pampi and Bani had peeped at the decorations and had sung its praises in the town. Indutai made two large pots of *kairichi dal* and two large pots of the sweet-sour drink, *panha*.

Now Kharemaster opened the magic box. The superintendent had given him a gramophone and records as a reward for his good work. The gramophone was a relatively new invention and little known in that township. As the women began gathering for the haldikunku, the gramophone started playing on the verandah. They were astonished.

“What’s this?” they cried. How was it making the sound of a man? They peeped into the gramophone’s loudspeaker. No one was hidden in it. Then where was the sound coming from? They questioned Kharemaster. Finally Kharemaster responded, ‘I’ve hidden a man in here. He’s going to stay hidden till midnight, then I will bring him out’ The haldikunku is an occasion for women only, but as the news of this magic spread, even the men began gathering; soon the entire town was there. Kashitai and Indutai were bone weary, giving the ladies haldikunku, and serving everyone kairichi dal and panha, but the joy of having won over the people in the town was an exhilarating compensation.

Manutai and Mathu resumed their routine. On school holidays they played to their hearts’ content. One day Indutai said to her husband. The girls always go to their friends’ houses to play. I think that we should buy them some play pots and pans, so they can play *bhatukali* here.’

But Kharemaster said, ‘Their life will be spent with pots and pans. Let them not get loaded with those things just yet’ Indutai’s enthusiasm waned, but the girls played bhatukali at Yami’s or Chanda’s; Kharemaster turned a blind eye to this.

Bhatukali was a game played by girls, where they imitated their mother’s world. One of the girls generally had a baby brother in tow. He would be cast in the role of the ‘husband’ of whoever pretended to be the ‘married woman’. If there was no brother, one of the girls would play the husband. Then the play-acting would begin. Just like their mothers, they heated bath water, made tea and cooked rice, dal and vegetables, all of course on an unlit stove. The husband was always served first. He would be requested to eat in the traditional formal language, which the little girls imitated to perfection. The girls’ very voices would become an exact copy of their mothers’; they would also reproduce the exact words they heard daily.

The puffed rice, nuts, and sweet *battashe* that had been given for this bhatukali, became ‘rice, dal and vegetables’ and were served to the ‘husband’. The ‘women’ of the household ate only after the ‘husband’ had eaten. Then came the ‘clearing up’ and ‘washing the dishes’. The girls would almost forget that this was only a game.

Although Kharemaster did not care for this domestic game, he always encouraged any game involving physical exercise. So on school holidays, Manutai and Mathu gathered their neighbourhood friends at the Ram temple. Then, the temple courtyard resonated with their games of *jhimma*, *phugdya*, *basphugdya* and many other traditional, athletic games for girls.

Life in the little town moved in a fixed pattern. Early each morning, Indutai, like other women in the town, sprinkled water outside the door, in a ritual ‘purification’. Then a host of daily visitors would appear, asking for alms.

Usually, the first to arrive was ‘Vasudeo’. “Vasudeo” was a godly name given to a glorified beggar. He was dressed like Krishna, complete with a peacock feather in his cap. He danced, accompanied by his own religious chanting and by the music he created, with his hand-held castanets.

“Vasudeo\* was generally followed by the *nandibaelwallah* —the man who came with his nandibael—a bullock. He went from house to house leading this nandibael, whose back was covered with a festive coloured cloth. The nandibael was trained to nod his

head in a 'yes' or 'no' response when it was asked a question. Manutai and Mathu were amused by this and always asked the animal a host of questions.

Sometimes a burly, saffron-robed sadhu would appear at their doorstep. In his full-throated voice, he would recite the *Manache* sloka—hymns composed by the poet-saint Ramdas. Manutai and Mathu would watch, mesmerized by this spectacle. Kharemaster made it a point to expose the girls to as many of these influences as he could. He wanted them to have a broad background and to be knowledgeable about things beyond just their books.

One morning, a different tune was heard. A half dozen Christian children were standing outside the house singing, and asking for a donation.

Come and behold, in the stables.

Our beloved star.

In David's town, in Bethlehem.

In David's town, come and behold.

It was the first day of Christmas. Kharemaster didn't want to give money to those children. The girls went out to listen, but he stayed indoors. As usual, the girls asked their father about the singers after they left, but Kharemaster avoided answering. The girls forgot all about it and went their way but Kharemaster began thinking. It was true that he wanted to give the girls as much knowledge as possible; to be exposed to as many different influences as possible. But shouldn't he draw a line somewhere? On what basis should that be done?

The festival of Muharram, celebrated by the Muslims, followed. With great enthusiasm, Kharemaster took the girls to see the Muharram procession. People from all around thronged to see the *dole* that were carried in the procession. The *dole* were paper towers, several metres high, made of multi-coloured paper, decorated with shiny pieces of mother-of-pearl and tiny mirrors. It was truly a spectacular sight. The Muharram 'tigers' also danced in this procession. They were young men who wore just a loincloth around the waist, and had painted black and yellow tiger-like stripes on their bodies, on the tight-fitting cap on their heads and on pointed wire tails, attached to their waists. To the beat of drums, they swayed from one side of the road to the other, bending at the knees and coming back up. With each rhythmic step, they chanted loudly, their tails swaying majestically behind them. Seeing their ferocious faces, little children shivered in fright. They clung to their ciders shrieking, '*Tabut* is here. *Tabut* is here.' The tigers were very proud of their performance and boasted about it around the town.

As they were watching the *dole*, at one spot, the curtain before them was lifted- They saw what looked like two heads being carried in trays! One of the heads had blood around it, and it resembled the head of Abdullah, one of Manutai's classmates. Seeing that, Manutai screamed. 'Anna! That's Abdullah's head. Who cut his head? Where's his neck?' Kharemaster hushed her and said, 'This is not real. He's sitting in a hole underneath and two wooden blocks are around his neck.'

On the way home, Kharemaster stopped at Bukharali's house and asked him to explain the significance of Muharram to the girls. Bukharali described in detail the massacre, the battle of Karbala, told them about Hussain and Hassan, fed them delicious *kheer* and sent them home.

Kharemaster was so enthusiastic about broadening the girls' knowledge, that he decided they should visit a hospital, so that they would be familiar with human anatomy. He went to meet Dr. Dabke, a casual acquaintance, and asked for permission. Dr. Dabke hesitated. 'We're performing a post-mortem tomorrow. It's a case of suspected poisoning.' 'Is it all right if I bring the girls?' asked Kharemaster. Dabke thought for a moment. Well, you decide. A dead body is frightening enough. And this one will be cut open. Will the girls be able to bear it? Will they understand anything?' 'this could not dampen Kharemaster's unbounded enthusiasm. 'Let's see what happens. Of course, only if you allow it.' The doctor reluctantly agreed.

Kharemaster took Manutai and Mathu to the hospital. The corpse lay on the table in the autopsy room. Manutai screamed, 'Anna, this man is naked! Doesn't he wear clothes?' Mathu said, 'Maybe he's crazy. Like Sonya, in our alley.' The doctor picked up his shiny instruments. He looked uncertainly at Kharemaster and his daughters. The girls were already frightened; the instruments made them more so. Manutai pleaded, 'Anna, let's go home.' Mathu began pulling at him. The doctor too, said, 'I think it's better if you take the girls home. They may even faint on seeing this.' A little unhappily, Kharemaster brought the girls home. And then, he began to feel remorseful about his crazy misadventure.

When Deshpandemaster heard the story, he took Kharemaster to task. There's a time and place for everything. It's true that you want to teach the girls everything. I know that. But is this the age for them to learn about such things?'

Kharemaster was already feeling guilty. He found a way out. "You're right. Oh, good—I'm glad I remembered!"

'What?'

'Will you take over the girls' education?'

'Exactly what do you mean?'

'Will you tutor them? Whatever you decide to charge is acceptable.'

'But, why me when you're here?'

'Look at it this way. I have barely four years of schooling. How much more can I teach them? If you take them under your wings, they will go at least as far as the Vernacular Final. Otherwise, in one more year, their studies will come to 'a halt. Then their lot will be like that of the other girls!'

Deshpandemaster saw the logic of this. He said, 'Fine, starting tomorrow—no, not tomorrow. Thursday is Dassera. Well start on that auspicious day.'

Deshpandemaster turned to go, then couldn't resist it. 'But, Kharemaster, like your name proclaims, you are the real teacher.' Both smiled at the pun. The word 'Khare' meant 'real' in Marathi.

Now that Deshpandemaster had taken over the girls' education, Kharemaster felt that a load had been taken off his shoulder. The two families grew closer. The girls grew very fond of Deshpandemaster, and considered him to be an uncle. So they began calling him 'Kaka'. Soon the two men began calling each other 'Anna' and 'Kaka'.

Indutai was expecting again and was more worried than ever before. What if this baby was also a girl? On the two earlier occasions her husband had insisted, 'I really want girls.' The affection he showered on them convinced Indutai that he genuinely meant that. Yet, a woman without a son was considered inferior, both by others and by herself. A few of the neighbourhood women were also expecting but two of them already had both girls and boys. For the third, Harinabai Tambat, this was her first pregnancy. Indutai often ran into her at the water taps. Each time, Harinabai would say, with great conviction, 'This first baby will certainly be a boy.'

Indutai felt that it would be much better, in every way, if she had a boy this time. But what if it wasn't? She was puzzled. How did Harinabai speak with such certainty?

One day, there were just the two of them at the taps. Indutai broached the topic with Harinabai. She replied, 'I've been taking steps to make sure it's a boy from the very first month. That's how I'm so certain.'

'Steps? What steps? What can possibly guarantee a boy?'

Harinabai said, 'Everyday, I drink the urine of a buffalo. Twice a day. It's guaranteed to work! It's always worked before with others. But remember the urine must be a buffalo's. A cow's urine will not do!'

Indutai walked home with her ghagar filled with water, thinking this over. Could this really be true? Should she try it? She knew that her husband would not like this one bit! So she decided to consult Kashitai.

The very next day she spoke to Kashitai. Kashitai was so stunned that in the heat of the moment she went to the door of the sitting room and blurted to her husband, 'See what Indu is saying!'

Kharemaster, who was chatting with Deshpandemaster, just could not believe that Indutai had been thinking along these lines. 'This is the limit of stupidity,' he said to Indutai. 'To think that you can get a boy by eating or drinking something!' Indutai was crest-fallen. Kashitai tried to reassure her. 'Don't say that Annabhauji. In the *Ramayana*, King Dashratha performed a *yagnya* to get sons and when his three queens ate the prasad from the *yagnya*, they gave birth to four sons one after another!'

Deshpandemaster looked on bemusedly. 'Don't blame Indutai. All Hindus think that a son belongs to their family, while a daughter goes away to others. A dying Hindu needs a son to put the drops of *Gangajal* in his mouth, to perform the *shraddha* ceremony after his death, to repay all debts due to ancestors and to keep his family name alive. So a Hindu woman wants a son at any cost.'

One day, Gopikabai enthusiastically spread the word. The great saint Vaman Maharaj is coming to Ghodnadi soon. He can cure any disease. And, all he has to do is to bless people without limbs, and they can walk! As for the childless, he guarantees, nothing less than a son! Imagine that! These miracles are child's play for him.'

Vaman Maharaj arrived in Ghodnadi amidst much fanfare, and stayed in an ashram on the outskirts of the town, next to the mamledar's office. He seemed to have mesmerized not just Ghodnadi but the surrounding towns and villages as well. All business in the town came to a complete standstill. There was always a crowd in front of the ashram to catch a glimpse of the Maharaj. His devotees flocked to him, convinced that with the Maharajji's blessings, their every prayer would be answered. Some came because they were desperate for a son, others came so that he could cure their ills.

Deshpandemaster believed in saints, meditation and yoga. In order to gain inner peace, he practised yoga faithfully. Kharemaster, who had never even considered such things, thought that Vaman Maharaj was a charlatan, and an out and out crook; Dcshpandemaster was not sure what the true story was.

For the two previous weeks, the group at Nathbhatji's verandah had related stories of the Maharajji's miraculous powers. Kharemaster repeatedly told everyone, 'The man has come to dupe you. Don't get caught in his web.' The angry response always was, 'You'll learn your lesson when he puts you in your place.'

Vaman Maharaj decided he would come to the Rama temple on the religious occasion of Dattajayanti. The previous day, Kharemaster had been involved in a heated argument with a half dozen devotees. Indutai tried to reason with him. 'Everyone feels so strongly about the Maharaj! Why must you pick a fight and alienate the whole town?' She felt that since the entire town sang the praises of the greatness of the Maharaj, there must be some truth in it! When she tried to express this to Kharemaster, he lost his temper, 'Don't you pay your respects to that crook? I won't tolerate it!'

The entire town seemed to be under some magic spell on the Dattajayanti day. Long before daybreak, hundreds converged on the Rama temple. The temple was packed; those who couldn't fit inside, sat outside. Indutai sat with Manutai and Mathu in the temple, just outside the inner sanctum. Devotees chanted all sorts of incantations; some, playing the castanets, twirled around themselves, almost in a trance.

A couple of villagers, from a village five miles from Ghodnadi, had made a special plea to the Maharaj. As part of their holy commitment, they had literally rolled along the five-mile road to Ghodnadi. As a result, their clothes were in shreds and they were bleeding profusely. But caught in the throes of religious fervour, they were completely oblivious to their wounds, feeling instead a sense of surrender as well as of glory.

In the temple, his devotees had arranged a throne-like seat for Vaman Maharaj. The bleeding villagers were given the pride of place in front. Kharemaster, with a frown of disapproval on his face, sat in the very first row. The fervent chanting of the devotees continued. Finally, at eight that night, the shout went up, 'Maharaj is here. Maharaj is here.' With their first glimpse of the Maharaj, some of the devotees were so overcome that they actually cried. Maharaj sat regally on his seat and raised his hand for silence. At once, there was complete silence, accentuated by the breathing of the crowd. Maharaj closed his eyes, deep in meditation. The devotees watched as if mesmerized. Fifteen minutes went by. Maharaj opened his eyes and gestured to say, 'Continue.' The chanting was louder than ever. Maharaj himself, joined the chanting, twirling around. Once again he raised his hand for silence. The devotees quietened down. They were eager to hear the sound of his nectar-like voice. Kharemaster was a silent witness to this spectacle. He didn't once get up. Maharaj could not help but notice this. He roared, 'There's an atheist

here. He goes around challenging me. I, too, have a challenge for him. Let him come forward and be recognized. I will turn him into ashes. Fool! You dare to challenge God himself? Your total annihilation will be your punishment!’

Kharemaster stood up. Indutai was terrified. Manutai and Mathu began screaming, ‘Anna, don’t, Anna, don’t. You’ll turn into ashes.’ Kharemaster came up to the girls and scolded them. Indutai and the girls were crying. Kharemaster turned around, went up to Maharaj and said, ‘I’m the atheist you mentioned. Go ahead, turn me into ashes. Show me what you can do.’

Vaman Maharaj roared. ‘Come to your senses. I’ll forgive you this once. If you challenge me again, that will be the end of you. After that, you cannot come back to life!’

‘So be it!’ Kharemaster roared back.

Maharaj closed his eyes, and made meaningless ‘chhhaa chhhuu’ noises. Ten endless minutes passed by. The ‘chhhaa chhhuu’ seemed to go on continuously, without any effect. Kharemaster said, ‘You fake! You’re nothing but a crook! Go ahead, turn me to ashes.’ He bared his chest in a further challenge. Maharaj was shaken. Kharemaster said, ‘Do it now. You have duped our town for two months. Today I will expose you completely.’

Vaman Maharaj faltered. He rose from his seat. ‘Give way, give way, let me go,’ he shouted. Somehow he made his escape and fled under the cover of the crowd. The crowd watched in stunned silence. The girls ran to their father and clung to him.

Vaman Maharaj ran away from Ghodnadi that very night.

Deshpandemaster said to Kharemaster, ‘Marvellous! You were great! You opened everyone’s eyes. Mine too!’

Next day at Nathbhatji’s, everyone crowded around Kharemaster. ‘Kharemaster, how did you know this man was a crook?’

‘A true saint does not enslave people. He looks inward. Selfish, fake sadhus live off the fears of others. This man has been selling himself ever since his arrival in Ghodnadi. Such people also have underlings that spread false tales of their master’s feats.’

It was time to take Indutai to Awaas for her confinement. Manutai was seven now, Mathu five. They were not old enough to be without their mother at Ghodnadi, so they had to be sent to Awaas along with Indutai. Kharemaster was uneasy that they would miss school for two months, but there seemed to be no alternative.

Kharemaster returned to an empty house after seeing the three safely to Awaas. He missed Manutai and Mathu terribly; then-voices echoed in the silent house. And he was terribly worried about Indutai, Would all go well? If it were to be another daughter would she be shattered? What about the girls? Of course their grandparents would see that they were fed properly, but who was to watch over them when they went out to play? Their grandparents were old. And Mathu was particularly naughty. Sometimes difficult to manage.

Occasionally Deshpandemaster would come over to chat. Khare master rhapsodized over the girls when talking to him. Deshpandemaster listened with a smile. Once he remarked casually, ‘Anna, after all, these are daughters. Once they are married and go to their own homes, you won’t see them for years on end. What will you do then?’

One day, a month before the new baby was due; Lakhooanna and his family were in the kitchen at Awaas, sitting in a circle on the floor, enjoying their midday meal. Suddenly, a snake appeared from behind the cupboard where the papads and pickles were stored and crept along the wall behind the children. They screamed and jumped up. Everyone held his breath and watched as the snake slowly slithered out of the back door. Lakhooanna had not allowed anyone to kill the snake that day. He told Indutai, Varu, our ancestors have sent this snake to bless you. This year you'll surely have a boy.'

Indutai gave birth to a healthy baby boy. Her folks were very relieved and happy. When she found out that it was a boy, Indutai's extreme joy made her almost hysterical, luckily she was back to normal in a few days. Lakhooanna sent his son-in-law the glad tidings of the baby boy. Kharemaster discovered that he himself was also relieved that it was a boy. The baby's *barsan*—naming ceremony—was done in great style, but, since the family custom dictated that the first boy is not given a formal name, he was simply called 'Nana'.

Indutai watched over Nana night and day. But on the night of his barsan, she dozed off for a few minutes. She woke up with a start, looked at the cradle in the light of the oil lamp, and screamed! A snake had encircled the rope attached to the cradle. The whole household came running and watched, petrified in fear. Then Lakhooanna came forward, carefully picked up the baby from his cradle, looked at the snake and said. The snake must not be killed. He is the spirit of our forefathers. He has come to see the baby.' Everyone crowded around Indutai and told her, 'Varu, your son will be very fortunate. He has been blessed by our ancestor himself.'

Six weeks went by very quickly. But Indutai was growing uneasy because the girls were missing their schoolwork. So she repeatedly asked Lakhooanna to take them back to Ghodnadi. As soon as Kharemaster heard this, he came right away to fetch his family. The girls ran to Anna and clung to him. Kharemaster was overcome with emotion. He held them close and petted them. They made mock complaints, 'Anna, why didn't you come for so long? We're not going to talk to you!'

Kharemaster looked fondly at his son on his lap and listened to the story of the special blessing by the ancestor. Then somehow he also began to feel that his son was destined for greatness. At Awaas, there was a temple of Nagoba, the cobra. Lakhooanna suggested that before they left, the two of them should go to the temple with the baby and take the *darshan* of Nagoba. Kharemaster agreed to that too. Deshpandemaster laughed out aloud when later Kharemaster related all this to him. He said, 'Anna, if we worship Vaman Maharaj, we are foolish and have blind faith. You, on the other hand, call a snake your ancestor. You bow before the stone snake in the temple, believe that the future of the children depends on the planets in their horoscopes, and on top of it claim to be a reformer and a rationalist!' Kharemaster listened to these words and was amused at the inconsistency in his own behaviour.

But when he felt that the son would be very fortunate what did that mean? What would he be? A doctor? A lawyer? A professor? The middle class people of the time did not know of any prospects beyond this. In any case, Kharemaster had no idea what should be done to fulfil his son's destiny. Deshpandemaster did not know either, but he was a practical man. There is plenty of time to plan Nana's future,' he said, 'first we must



make up the lessons missed by Manutai and Mathu.’ He planned out, in detail, the lessons for the next few weeks.

The cost of living was low in those days and they were able to put a little money aside each month. Every year, on the auspicious occasion of Dassera, Kharemaster bought a little gold, as was traditionally done. For Nana’s first birthday, Kharemaster decided to have gold armlets made for him. He took some of this gold and went to Shankar, the goldsmith, and waited there as the armlets were being made. Shankar’s sixteen-year-old widowed daughter Sitabai hovered around. Kharemaster asked Shankar, ‘Why don’t you send your daughter to school?’ Shankar replied, ‘Masterji, women in our caste do not go to school.’ Kharemaster said, ‘Shankarbhai, let her learn, instead of just twiddling her thumbs in her father’s home. Then, she can get a job as a school teacher, and support herself.’ The goldsmith gave this some thought. He scratched his three-day-old beard and said, ‘I cannot send her to a regular school. You know what our caste is. Will you teach her at home? That will solve the problem.’ Kharemaster agreed. Gingerly, Shankar raised the question of payment. Kharemaster responded, ‘I won’t do it for money. Let’s just do what’s good for her.’

Sitabai—Shiti, as she was called—began coming to Kharemaster’s house on days when there was no school. She used to chat with Indutai, play with the girls for a while and then Kharemaster would begin teaching her. The lessons lasted an hour. Sometimes Shiti took Nana home with her to play. She was very bright. Kharemaster was proud of her and would tell Indutai how clever Shiti was and what a quick learner she was. But Indutai had started getting upset about these teaching sessions. Kharemaster was aware of that, but in his enthusiasm he would go overboard in praising Shiti. Indutai was jealous and finally she could stand it no more. She found all sorts of reasons to send Manutai or Mathu to the room upstairs where Kharemaster was teaching Shiti. When the girls came down from these made-up errands, she would ask casually what was going on upstairs.

One day Indutai asked Manutai to take a just-delivered letter up to her father. Just at that moment, Kharemaster was kissing Shiti, obviously overcome with tremendous pleasure at her progress. Manutai saw this. Naturally, Kharemaster was embarrassed and startled. He warned Manutai not to let her mother know. Manutai was so afraid that when she came down and her mother asked her as usual what was going on, she responded ‘nothing’ and ran out. But this was more than enough to arouse Indutai’s suspicions.

Shiti went home. Kharemaster came downstairs. He glanced at Indutai and went out and stood on the verandah. His guilt, and the fact that his own daughter had seen what she should not have, made him even more ashamed. Had Manutai mentioned it to Indu? He felt more wretched than ever. Indutai was obviously upset and was banging pots and pans. The situation was heading for an explosion. Then, as offence is the best form of defence, Kharemaster entered the house and asked angrily, ‘Does no one sweep the room upstairs?’ Indutai was very angry. ‘Why? Was the great madam’s sari soiled? Tell her to sweep the room herself before you start teaching her tomorrow.’ Kharemaster was still not ready to back down. ‘Asking a guest to do our housework! I’ll do it myself.’

‘You do it then!’ Indutai said in a huff.

That day, the atmosphere in the house was very tense. Manutai got a spanking just because she had not arranged her books properly. There was no conversation in the house for two days. The girls were obviously nervous. They could not understand the reason for

this tension. Nana was the only one oblivious to this. He crawled around happily, throwing things around. Kharemaster convinced himself that Nana was smiling at him more often than usual.

Shiti came back for her lessons a few days later, but Kharemaster did not have the guts to start teaching her again. Curtly he told her, 'No lessons today.' Then Shiti took Nana home with her. When she brought him back after a short while, Indutai didn't so much as glance at her. But, a little later, Indutai noticed that Nana was wearing just one of his gold armlets. The other one had vanished! She called her husband and said, 'Great! Shiti has repaid you well. One of Nana's armlets is missing.' Kharemaster was shocked. He went to the goldsmith immediately and confronted Shiti, who denied any knowledge of it. Kharemaster said, 'Fine, I'll let the police know.' At the mention of the police, Shiti owned up to her mischief. This incident ruled out any further resumption of teaching.

Indutai may have been aware of the helplessness of her situation in case she decided to leave Kharemaster; maybe she was simply wise to the ways of the world, in any case, her innate feminine good sense prevailed, and soon she began behaving as if nothing had happened. Kharemaster himself experienced how giving in to the temptations of the flesh can soil even basically good people and for many days he grieved over his own actions.

Early one morning, the women went, as usual, to the store well for water. The store well had steps leading down to the water. 'The women began descending the steps, saw a corpse floating in the water, and ran out screaming! A crowd gathered. Someone recognized the corpse as that of Mandi, who worked at the mamledar's house. One person conjectured, 'She probably slipped and fell.' Another objected, 'There are steps right up to the water. If she had slipped, she would have climbed right back up.' A third enquired, 'Do they know this at the mamledar saheb's house?' But they were all afraid of the mamledar saheb. Who would be brave enough to go up to him and break the news? Finally, one villager summoned up courage and went to the mamledar saheb's house. A soldier stood guard at the gate. He listened to the story unconcernedly, and didn't budge. 'Please go tell them inside. So that—?'

They already know,' was his curt reply.

The news-bearer was astonished. They know that Mandi fell into the well! Then, remove the body. How can the women go there to wash clothes?'

The guard leant forward *and* whispered, 'Dadasaheb himself put the body there. Just go back the way you came.'

The news-bearer was speechless and left.

Dadasaheb was the mamledar's eldest son. He was a vagabond and was insolent and vain. A few days earlier the mamledar had been away on an overnight tour. That night, Dadasaheb caught hold of Mandi's hand. She screamed in fright. He clamped her throat. She took her last breath as she struggled desperately to free herself. Dadasaheb called the guard and said, 'Mandi has died. Take her and put her in the store well.' When the guard started to protest, Dadasaheb threatened to kill him. That night, the guard threw Mandi's corpse in the well. The mamledar returned. He suspected that his son was responsible for what had happened. He gave him a stern tongue lashing, but that was the end of it. The whole town knew that the mamledar's son had actually got away with murder, but everyone kept mum and saved his skin. Tatyabhatji continued going to the mamledar to

perform pujas and to read from the scriptures. If asked, he would reply, 'The police are investigating.'

Normally, Kharemaster would not have had the guts to talk to the fouzdar. But Fouzdar Deshmukh's young son was a playmate of Mathu and Manutai. So Kharemaster asked casually, 'What did they find out about Mandi's murder?'

The fouzdar replied nonchalantly, 'Oh, she slipped in the well and drowned.' And he continued on his way.

A few days later, the mamledar's chief clerk came to the Brahmin area and began inquiring where Kharemaster lived. Everyone, including Fouzdar Deshmukh, was very curious to know what business the mamledar had with Kharemaster.

The clerk inquired about Kharemaster's well-being. Then he came to the reason for his visit. 'My master is very proud that you are educating your daughter and that she is known in the school as a very good student. She is now of a marriageable age. Mamledar saheb is very keen to make her his daughter-in-law. That's why I—'

Kharemaster was livid. How dare they ask for Manutai's hand for the man who had killed Mandi! But he composed himself and said, 'We're not contemplating her marriage till her education is complete.' Yet the clerk insisted, 'Then you must surely agree to this match. Look here, Masterji. How far can you teach her here in Ghodnadi? Only as far as the local school can go, that is, only up to the fourth standard. If the mamledar saheb decides to, he can send her to Pune or Bombay for education. Also consider one more thing. When people in this town know that you are related to the mamledar saheb by marriage—.'

Then Kharemaster could take it no more. He stood up abruptly, and said, I have to go to work now. Tell mamledar saheb we're not thinking of it at this time.' Feeling that, at least in his own small way, he had taught the mamledar a lesson, Kharemaster was relieved.

The Christmas season was at hand. The women of the town had been invited to a programme at the Christian girls' school. That afternoon, at three, many Brahmin women gathered in the school hall. Jai, the sweeper woman was also present. She had become a Christian. Jai was dressed in a fine sari and she confidently came and sat with the other ladies, who made room for her. She taunted them at once, 'Aha! Once you pushed me aside, saying "don't touch". Now look at me!' The women didn't respond but were angry at her brazenness. Just then the curtain went up. Madamsaheb welcomed the women, then the entertainment programme began. The Christian girls staged a short play; then they sang a chorus of songs, in then- sweet voices. The theme for the entire presentation was the glory of the Christian religion, but, nonetheless, the programme was entertaining. The women were given flowers at the end. Each woman went home and sang praises of the programme; each one was also critical of Jai's brazenness. They were completely unaware that they had themselves alienated Jai and her friends, who had as a result deserted their own religion and adopted Christianity.

Indutai returned home with Manutai and Mathu. Like all the other women who had attended the programme, she and the girls 'purified' themselves by bathing over their 'sullied' clothes. Kharemaster witnessed this, but did not protest. He was, as usual, absorbed in his own world. Indutai related the tale of Jai's behaviour, yet he made no

response. He was aware that people like Jai had been made to feel that they were less than other human beings, really no better than insects! Now that the white Christian had made her realize that she was a person, an equal of others, it was but natural that she should give it back to those who had insulted her. Didn't even common persons like the mamledar or the fouzdar start behaving like mighty overlords as soon as the white man gave them power?

The missionary saheb lived outside the town, in a large house beyond trio canal. Only the village folk from the surrounding villages used to pass by; none of the Ghodnadikars went anywhere near the place.

The house was surrounded by a large compound which was fenced by a wall. There was a beautiful garden inside. Whenever Mahadu, the milkman, went to the missionary saheb's house to deliver milk, he would let his buffalo graze in the open field outside the compound. One day, the gate was left open by mistake and the animal entered the compound. Madamsaheb was very angry and told Mahadu, 'Don't let this animal graze in here. Take it out right now!' Mahadu immediately led the animal out. A few days later, the saheb saw the animal in the compound and gave Mahadu a strict warning; 'This animal must never enter the compound again. I won't stand for it.' 'Saheb, I swear it will never happen again, saheb!' Mahadu whacked the animal and got her out.

One day Mahadu *fell* asleep under a tree and the buffalo entered the saheb's compound again. It destroyed the saheb's garden. The saheb and madamsaheb were both incensed. Just then Mahadu woke up and ran to the compound. He was terrified when he saw the rifle in the saheb's hands. The rifle was fired as Mahadu was dragging the buffalo out. Mahadu died on the spot, a victim of the saheb's bullet.

The news spread in the town like wildfire. The missionary saheb had killed Mahadu with a bullet! As soon as the mamledar saheb got the news, he went to the missionary saheb's house to conduct an inquiry. The crowd that had gathered watched open-mouthed as they saw him smile, bow obsequiously and shake hands with the missionary saheb and his wife, and leave. Fouzdar Deshmukh did not even have the privilege of a handshake. Yet he saluted the saheb smartly as he left.

The town was numb with fear. They mourned the tragic loss of Mahadu. But no one had the guts to speak up against the saheb. Kharemaster smouldered in anger at this travesty of justice. And the knowledge that he dared not speak up or do something shamed him.

The following day, the missionary saheb appeared as usual at the school, with the same sweet smile on his face, silver tongued as ever. Kharemaster thought, 'What kind of man is this! Polished on the outside and rotten inside. A veritable saint and a satan!' But lest he lose his job, Kharemaster behaved as if nothing had happened. And with the realization that he too had double standards, he was more disgusted with himself than ever.

Manutai and Mathu were practising another song in honour of King George:

Hail to thee, George the Fifth, Lord of this Earth,  
Praised by the Wise! Emperor of this Land!

For Ever be Thou the Protector of this Earth.  
Protect us, O Great Soul, O Great Master.  
Most Respected Lord!

Manutai was introspective by nature. Mathu, who was more playful, used to alter the words on purpose and sing 'Fool' instead of 'Soul'. Manutai would scold her and would threaten to tell the teacher. Then Mathu would sing the eulogy properly.

*The* coronation ceremony of George V, King of England, and Emperor of India, was approaching. The government sent an edict to all the schools requiring them to hold a celebration praising the king. The programme had to be such that it would plant the seeds of loyalty towards the emperor as well as towards the British government

In accordance with that, the students were learning songs in praise of the king. The girls practised the songs everyday with Indutai; each time he heard them, Kharemaster writhed in anger. Instead of praying to God, his girls were praying for the well-being of an English king; that he had to tolerate it without a murmur of protest was unbearable. He felt that such songs would plant, in the children of future generations, seeds of loyalty to a foreign power. This way, the country was doomed to permanent slavery. One day, when he could bear it no more, he abruptly left his home and went to Deshpandemaster's home.

Kharemaster had not sat down and talked with Deshpandemaster for some time. He often thought: I made such a big fuss about Vaman Maharaj, but I did absolutely nothing for Mandi and Mahadu. What if Deshpandemaster raised that point? Of course, Deshpandemaster came regularly to their house to teach the girls; if their paths happened to cross, they would chat briefly and part

Today, however, Deshpandemaster seemed utterly dejected! His face was drawn and pale. He said not a word to Kharemaster but just gestured to him to 'sit'. Kharemaster sat and watched him in silence. Deshpandemaster choked back a sob and his eyes brimmed with tears. He turned around and wiped them with the ends of his dhoti. Kharemaster was worried. What could the matter be? He asked gently, 'Kaka, what's wrong?'

Deshpandemaster heaved a sigh. 'I was in Pune yesterday. There I found out that Barrister Savarkar has been sentenced to fifty years of rigorous imprisonment.' Kharemaster was numb, as if struck by a bolt of lightning. His mind rose in rebellion, but subsided, knowing that he was helpless to do anything. Words failed him.

Deshpandemaster said, 'Anna, please say something.'

Kharemaster was angry with himself. 'What's the use of idle talk when there's nothing I can do—.'

'But isn't it in your power to at least shed a few drops of tears at the sacrifice made by this great martyr?'

All the emotions Kharemaster had kept bottled inside for so long burst forth. He could not check his tears. He remembered the incident in Bombay. When he had expressed his admiration for the political revolutionary Damodar Chaphekar, Raosaheb Rege had warned him and silenced him. He hung his head in silence.

Deshpandemaster said gently, 'Anna, we won't talk of this if you don't want to.'

That's not it, Kaka. How can I talk about the great patriot Savarkar? My sense of shame doesn't let me speak.'

'What do you mean?'

'I really worshipped Savarkar. When I saw him at the anti-British procession in Pune, I was mesmerized by his inspiring presence, his fervour and the powerful speech he made. Then, in 1906, I read Savarkar's biography of Mazzini, the Italian revolutionary. I read and reread this great work, and also Savarkar's eulogy to Chaphekar and his other poems and writings.'

Deshpandemaster waited for Kharemaster to continue. 'But, one day, the British banned all Savarkar's writings, every single piece he had ever written. I had carefully hidden copies of all his works in my house. Then the news came that the British had started making house-to-house raids to seek out copies of his banned literature. I closed the door and burnt every scrap of his writing. That a coward like me should now shed tears for Savarkar is the limit of insincerity.'

He paused for a while and continued. 'So far, I was sorry only for myself. Now I can't see a way out for even the next generation, so I am more desperate than ever.' Then he described the new song the girls had learnt and how restless that made him.

Deshpandemaster replied, 'Is that all? I thought something terrible had happened. Anna, I'll give you a sure-fire cure for this. If the saheb teaches them one wrong thing, well teach them ten right things and wipe out the past. Is their brain being muddled with the Hail King George song? No problem, well teach them ten patriotic songs and clean out that loyalty nonsense. I'm sure you know so many of these songs. If you need more, I know a few.'

Kharemaster saw a glimmer of hope. 'And first of all,' Deshpandemaster continued, 'stop thinking of yourself as weak or as a coward. Anna, we're all a little scared inside. Even a wrestler has to start exercising slowly and build his muscles up gradually. It's the same thing with courage. Slowly one faces more and more difficult situations and bravery becomes second nature. But there is no need to tell you this. Without your knowing it, that's exactly what you've been doing.' Kharemaster looked at him in amazement. Deshpandemaster said, 'Isn't that true? When you're convinced something is right, haven't you been following the dictates of your conscience without worrying about what anyone says or feels? When you do this faithfully till the end, people will say "Annamaster was a brave man." Even then you will continue to say, "It's true, I did this, but I was afraid to do that"'

Kharemaster went home with peace in his heart.

Manutai and Mathu were reciting a new poem together:

Earthly needs may make me wander far and wide  
To distant lands, to royal enslavements,  
To ferocious jungles,  
To foreign lands, my limbs and body may destiny take,  
My mind and soul, yet, shall forever be with thee,

## My Motherland.

The girls' sweet voices rang out as they recited this poem. Kharemaster was touched. Mathu asked, 'Anna, what is "Motherland"?' Manutai said, "You ignorant child! "Motherland" is the place where you're born, that is, Awaas.' Kharemaster did not correct her. He was thrilled that his feelings were being echoed by the next generation, and began teaching them many new poems with renewed enthusiasm.

The day of the Coronation approached. It was to be celebrated all over India; enthusiastically by those who wanted to make a display of their loyalty to the crown, and in fear by others, under duress. The day before the Coronation, teachers in every class in the school drilled the students incessantly.

The mamledar saheb is coming tomorrow.'

'Be on your best behaviour or you will be caned.'

'When the bell rings, file out of the classroom.'

'Stand still. When the second bell rings, all of you start singing together. Now practise.'

The students practised the song honouring King George in a chorus. The teachers were pleased with their performance. 'Well done! Now remember, very important visitors are coming to our school tomorrow,' they warned the children, prodding each student's stomach with the end of their canes to make sure they understood that. On the one hand, the students were afraid of the cane, and on the other they were excited about the ceremony. The teachers repeated the instructions over and over again. 'And, everyone must wear clean clothes tomorrow, new clothes if you can. The mamledar saheb is coming, remember that. You must clap after the mamledar saheb's speech, not before. When will you clap?'

'After, not before,' the children parroted.

The town lived in fear of the mamledar saheb. Next day, two to three hundred freshly bathed and scrubbed children, some of whom had hardly slept the previous night, hurried to school for the ceremony. In those days, not everyone could afford to wash their clothes. And even if they were washed, it was impossible to remove all traces of the red dust that was picked up from the road; at best the white clothes would appear pink. Some turned up in these pink clothes; others wore torn but clean clothes. Tom clothes were so commonplace that, even on that day no one noticed them.

The school had been decorated the previous day with buntings and banners. The town leaders gathered for the ceremony. At the sound of the first whistle, the students filed out of their classrooms and came and sat in the tent. When the second whistle blew, the students rose, standing stiffly at attention. Several students were frightened out of their wits. The mamledar saheb arrived. Obediently, the children sat when he said 'Sit'. They rose on the third whistle and began to sing. There were almost as many different voices as there were children. Some brayed like a mule, others screeched; some only mouthed the words in fear.

Each one sang in his own pitch; some were shrill, others flat. To create musical harmony out of this chaos would have been beyond any teacher. King George's praises

were sung in this unmusical chorus. They prayed to God to let King George reign for long. Then the mamledar saheb spoke. Not one student understood a single word of his speech. The mamledar paused several times during his speech. When he stopped finally, none of the students realized that the speech was over. So until their teachers signalled, gesticulating wildly- the students did not start clapping and naturally they were roundly scolded later.

The missionary saheb and madam attended the ceremony. Deshpandemaster was of course present, as he was a teacher in the school. Kharemaster had received an invitation to the ceremony. Although he was not at all enthusiastic about it, he attended the ceremony as he was eager to see the short skit *The Greedy Boy*, in which Mathu was acting.

*The Greedy Boy* started. Mathu and Rungtha Sheth's son, Badri, were the two actors. With Mathu's first line, the play took an unexpected turn.

She completely lost track of the 'you' and the T. The dialogue went 'Why did you take my berries? You are greedy.' When she said T she pointed to Badri and when she said 'you' she pointed to herself. The funniest thing was that she carried this mistake faithfully throughout the whole performance! The audience began laughing, some even applauded. Mathu and Badri thought the skit was a hilarious success. Mathu looked at her father with pride. He was also laughing. The mamledar called the children to him and congratulated them.

After the ceremony, the children were given commemorative medals, and laddus and pedhas to eat. The shiny medals had blue ribbons attached to them; each blue ribbon had a safety pin. The children attached the medals to their shirts or frocks with the safety pins, quickly ate the goodies and went home with a word of praise from the headmaster. At home, Mathu and Manutai showed the medals to Aai and Anna. Indutai sat near the stove, busy, as usual, cooking. She made a fuss over the girls; Kharemaster tried to explain to them that the medals were a symbol of their slavery. They didn't understand the significance of Anna's words, but realized that he had not liked the medals, and their sense of pride in them lessened.

When Nana was barely two, another baby was on the way. Kharemaster was a little mortified by this rapidly growing family. He felt that this was not right. It was difficult to solve all the problems created by the expanding household. It was no longer possible to take the children to Awaas for Indutai's delivery as the girls would fall behind in their schoolwork. Indutai asked Kharemaster to write to Awaas and ask for her sister to come. Her sister had spent difficult days in Thane. Her husband had been bedridden, and she had half a dozen children. Her only recourse had been to work somewhere as a cook. When, after a prolonged illness, her husband died, Gangutai had to return to Lakhooanna at Awaas, with her children. Her brother was a rich farmer and taking care of this additional family was not a great problem, but Gangutai had become very morose. When they received Kharemaster's letter, Gangutai decided, with Lakhooanna's consent, to go to Ghodnadi with Gopal, her oldest son.

With the arrival of Gangutai and Gopal, Kharemaster felt that a load had slipped off his shoulder. Gopal was very hard working. He looked after the children, did the marketing and other outside errands. Indutai grew attached to him. One day, hesitantly, he asked her, 'Indumawshi, is it all right if I live here permanently with you? I want to



learn. I have completed three years of school. At Awaas, I have to work in the fields. What sort of future will I have that way?' His eyes welled with tears.

Indutai talked it over with Kharemaster. Kharemaster remembered his own childhood, his leaving home to go to Bombay in quest of education. If Gopal wanted to learn, he would support him. Hadn't Phatak mama done that for him? He called Gopal to him.

'Gopal, how old are you?'

Gopal answered hesitantly, 'Fourteen.'

'Do you have your school leaving certificate?'

Gopal was hopeful when he heard the question. He said with enthusiasm, 'Oh, yes, I have it.'

Kharemaster was happy. He remembered how he had not been able to learn any further for lack of this vital piece of paper. 'Do you really, truly, want to study further?'

'Yes, I do.'

'You'll have to work very hard. You must be prepared for all tasks that come your way. Success only comes if you really strive for it. You'll have to keep this in mind at all times. Can you do that?'

'Yes, Anna. I'm ready to do anything. When Aai used to go out to work in Thane, I cooked, and took care of my brothers and sisters. Order me to do any work and I'll gladly do it. I'll go to school and stay up at night to study. Anna, I want to study, I really do.' He wiped away his tears. Kharemaster was touched. He held Gopal close.

'It's settled then. You'll live with us and go to school. You'll start school right from tomorrow.' Gopal started school the very next day. Kharemaster was happy; he had been able to help at least one of Gangutai's children.

Indutai gave birth to a girl; she was named Shanta. A month later, it was time for Gangutai to return to Awaas; her other children had been left in the care of her sister-in-law. Gopal saw her safely to Awaas and returned to Ghodnadi. He took over the entire responsibility of the house and didn't let Indutai lift a finger. He cooked, served the meals, watched over the children and played with them—all this he did readily, with enthusiasm. The girls had a ready-made big brother—Gopaldada.

Deshpandemaster prepared Manutai very well for her seventh year's annual examination. Kharemaster took her to the Training College in Pune for the exam. He saw that Manutai was the only girl out of all the students in the hall. He was proud that he was one of the very few who saw to the education of girls. Manutai did well in all her papers. When they returned to Ghodnadi, Deshpandemaster went over each question paper with her. He was pleased to hear her answers. Kharemaster said, 'Manutai's not just going to pass. She'll get a second class.' A few days later, when the results were announced, Manutai really had passed with a second class. Kharemaster distributed pedhas to all his neighbours. The family's joy knew no bounds. Kharemaster looked at Manutai with pride and asked her, 'Manutai, you want to continue your education, right?' 'Oh, yes, Anna. Yes I do. But in which school, Anna? There's nothing more in Ghodnadi.'

Roth in her school and in the neighbourhood, Mathu spread the good news that her sister had passed in the second class. Kharemaster took Deshpandemaster's advice and

enrolled Manutai for one year in the Madamsaheb's English school, before sending her to Pune. Manutai made excellent progress in the English school too.

The girls who had played bhatukali with Manutai had been married long ago and were now cooking with real pots and pans. So Manutai became a source of pride for the Brahmin women. But they were equally concerned about her marriage; from their point of view, she was far too old to be unmarried still. Indutai told them with pride, 'Our daughter is going to Pune to study.' Kharemaster was determined that Manutai should receive further education, but he didn't know what arrangements he could make for her to live in Pune, or whether he could afford it.

Indutai's joy was clouded by a new worry. Manutai was now about twelve and had started wearing saris; she would reach puberty very soon. If that happened in Pune, would she know what to do, how to behave in a stranger's home? What arrangements would be made for Manutai's lodging in Pune? Would she be able to follow the traditional abstinence from work for those three days every month, and observe the strict rules of not touching anything? If she didn't, would the people she stayed with be understanding? Of course, she could not share her concerns with her husband. Finally, she had a heart to heart talk with Manutai. She explained the impending physical changes, what signs to watch for, and what she must do. She told her not to talk to boys; not to befriend them. Manutai was overwhelmed by all this, and, full of doubts and fears, she asked her mother all kinds of questions. And kept all these newly learnt secrets buried deep within herself.

Kharemaster was completely unaware of Indutai's growing worries. The school year began in June, so he had to make immediate arrangements for Manutai's accommodation. He wrote to his cousin in Pune, saying that he was bringing Manutai. A week before the departure date, he booked two seats in the daily tonga that took the mail from Ghodnadi to Pune. Kharemaster was very sad that his darling Manutai, the apple of his eye, was going far away. But he knew that he had to accept it for her own good. He remembered his childhood; how he had left Guhagar, taken a plunge into the unknown future and reached Bombay and how that had completely changed his life. His optimism told him that there would be a way out for the girls just as there had been for him. Finally, it was the departure day. Manutai felt elated that she was doing something special, and, at the same time she was very sad leaving Aai and Anna. Mathu and Nana.

Indutai packed a comb, a mirror, a box of kumkum, clothes and a tin of laddus in Manutai's trunk, and gave her a compact bedroll. It was time for Kharemaster and Manutai to go. Manutai touched her parents' feet. She held her mother in a tight embrace as she wiped her eyes. Indutai was weeping. Mathu was also in tears. 'I'm going away with you,' said little Nana, grabbing on to Manutai's hand. She kissed him. Kharemaster and Manutai left. Kharemaster had taken the first bold step towards the girls' higher education. The tonga set off.

There was very little traffic on the road to Pune. Near Koregaon, they saw an eight- or nine-year-old girl being dragged by a rope attached to the back of a bullock cart. She was screaming. 'Aai, Aai! Help! Help me!' The tongawallah halted and said to the gariwallah, 'Are you trying to kill her?'

'Let her die! That's just what she deserves. She doesn't want to go to her in-laws. Each time I put her in this cart, she jumps out to go back to her mother. Eight years old!

But obstinate as a mule!’ replied the man in the cart. He looked at the girl and yelled, You good-for-nothing! Get in the cart or lit drag you all the way.’

Kharemaster’s heart was wrenched when he saw this. Manutai was scared to the point of tears. Kharemaster held her close and comforted her.

They reached the cousin’s house. But the cousin was very discouraging about Manutai’s education. This Pune is a city of ruffians. They always tease and harass girls going to school. And who will accompany her to school every day? Who’ll bring her back? And if she lives here with us, even I can’t possibly watch over her all the time.’ Manutai heard this and looked helplessly at her father. He was completely taken aback. Now what was to be done? Should he take her back to Ghodnadi? Let his long-cherished dreams come to naught? It was necessary to make independent arrangements for Manutai here, but he didn’t have the wherewithal for that.

Kharemaster left his cousin’s home very disappointed. Perhaps, he thought, he should make arrangements to return to Ghodnadi. On the way, he passed a school where the students had just been let out. A shouting, laughing, cavorting throng of boys emerged. Watching their joyful exuberance, Kharemaster momentarily forgot his worries. Just then, two teachers emerged from the school gate. Kharemaster suddenly had a flash of inspiration. He approached them, greeted them with a *namaskar* and said, ‘I’m a stranger here. Please help me. I need some information.’

‘Information? What sort of information?’

Kharemaster briefly described the problem and asked what could be done about Manutai’s education. Both began thinking. Then one of them remembered something.

‘Here’s what you do. That is Appa Balwant Chowk, over there.’ He pointed towards it. ‘Right next to it is “Anandaashram”. It’s an institution that encourages education. A gentleman named Hari Narayan Apte lives there. He will give you the correct advice.’

Kharemaster saw a glimmer of hope. He went immediately to ‘Anandaashram’, and met Hari Narayan Apte, the well-known author of several great reformist novels. Kharemaster felt encouraged when he saw him. He asked Apte eagerly, ‘I want to educate my daughter. Is there a safe place here, where she can stay?’ Haribhau felt sympathetic towards Kharemaster. He, too, was aware that finding a safe, respectable place for a girl was of paramount importance. He gave the problem serious consideration.

Just then, a gentleman came by to meet Apte. The visitor was short, fair complexioned, and very simply dressed. Yet, seeing him, Apte instinctively stood up and did namaskar with great respect. He told his visitor about Kharemaster’s daughter. The man immediately said, ‘Will you let your daughter stay in our ashram at Hingane? There, lodging and boarding will not be a problem. Look here, come to Hingane tomorrow. See everything for yourself.’ Haribhau also supported this idea and introduced the visitor. This is Professor Dhondo Keshav Karve.’

Kharemaster did namaskar again. ‘I’ll certainly come to the ashram tomorrow.’

Next morning, Kharemaster and Mathu set out for Hingane. He hailed a tonga. ‘What will you charge to go to Hingane?’

The tongawallah asked, ‘Hingane? Where? Not to the house of those shaven women?’

Kharemaster was taken aback. ‘Shaven women?’

“Yes, sir! Just imagine! There they teach those shaven widows to read and write.”

Kharemaster became suddenly aware of how strongly opposed people were to Professor Karve’s mission. He remembered that Professor Karve had made it his mission to educate widows and had ignored all opposition. Karve himself had married a widow. Kharemaster had heard all this. But should he keep Manutai in an ashram for widows? When they reached Hingane, the woman in charge showed them around the entire campus. Most of the women he saw were widows.

‘Are there no unmarried girls here?’

‘Oh, we do have some. But girls get married at such an early age that we have very few unmarried students. But slowly their numbers are increasing.’

Kharemaster liked the ashram. He was satisfied that his daughter would be in a very safe place and would receive a good education. He went to meet Professor Karve.

‘Have you seen the ashram?’

“Yes. I really liked it.”

‘Good! Then will you let your daughter remain here? She can study up to her Matriculation examination.’

Kharemaster was very happy, but there was still one more worry.

‘But what will it cost? I’m not sure I can afford it.’

‘Don’t worry about that. The monthly boarding fees are two and a half rupees. But some rich people have donated scholarships to encourage the education of girls. The Maharaja of Baroda has recently endowed a five-rupee-a-month scholarship. Your daughter will get that. But she must work hard. Then there will be no problem till her Matriculation examination.’

The feelings of both joy and gratitude were overwhelming. For a while Kharemaster could not speak. He rose to take his leave. ‘Should I leave her here right now?’

‘Yes. The new term started just four or five days ago.’

Manutai was listening carefully. She had noticed that her father had looked worried ever since they had come to Pune; now he looked contented and happy. She, too, felt that all that had happened was for her good. Professor Karve called her to him. ‘Child, what’s your name?’

‘Manorama Khare.’

‘Would you like to be a student here?’

Manutai nodded. Kharemaster did namaskar to Professor Karve and he and Manutai left the office.

Now it was time to say goodbye, to leave his beloved child and go back to Ghodnadi! Both were overcome with sadness. Kharemaster held Manutai close.

‘You’ll be all right, won’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Manutai’s voice was hoarse, caught between emotion and excitement. Her eyes filled with tears.

‘My child, take care of yourself. Study hard. I’ll write to you every week. Don’t be afraid. To achieve something you have to pay a price.’ He could speak no more.

Manutai smiled through her tears. ‘Don’t worry, Anna, I’ll be fine. I’ll work hard.’

Kharemaster patted her head, and turned to go. Both continued to wave at each other, turning around again and again.

Birds teach their young ones to fly. Then the fledglings leave the nest. Kharemaster left Manutai and started his journey home, but did not realize that on that day he had planted the seeds of his future loneliness.

As he travelled back to Ghodnadi, with a heavy heart, Kharemaster began thinking about all he had seen in Hingane. Most of the students there were widows; just a handful of the girls were unmarried.

They had come from nearby Konkan, and also from far off places such as Nagpur, Indore and Gwalior. He realized that new ideas had sprouted in very few places and that others, like him, must have had to fight public opposition. In those days, widows at Ghodnadi or at Guhagar were routinely shorn of their hair. This was done to disfigure them; widow was not supposed to look attractive. An unshorn widow simply did not exist. At Hingane, there were roughly equal numbers of shorn and unshorn widows. To let widows remain unshorn and to educate them was to scorn tradition—this was also a great battle. Kharemaster’s spirits were lifted knowing that there were some who were fighting this battle fearlessly.

Indutai, who was anxious to know if safe arrangements had been made for her daughter, was waiting eagerly for Kharemaster. His first words set her heart at rest. ‘Indu, Manutai is in good hands. We have nothing to worry about.’ *When* Kharemaster related all that had occurred, she felt completely at peace. But she missed Manutai intensely. Kharemaster felt a renewed sense of optimism. He had become convinced that Mathu would be able to follow her sister to Hingane.

When Manutai came home for the Diwali festival holiday, her parents’ joy knew no bounds. Anna and Aai could not do enough to pamper her. They listened to Manutai’s stories of Hingane in amazement; everything she described opened up a new world to them.

‘Aai, you know, at Hingane, everything runs by the bell.’

“What do you mean?”

‘A wake-up bell, a lunch bell, the school bell—a bell for each class, a bell when school is over, an evening bell, a sleeping bell. We call it the city of ringing bells,’ she laughed. They were impressed by the strict discipline of the ashram. But Kharemaster realized a little sadly that Manutai looked only at her mother as she spoke. He asked, ‘What do you to eat during the break?’ Manutai said, ‘Anna, only the paying girls get morning tea and breakfast. Aai, by lunch time I’m so hungry, I gobble up everything on my plate! We wait and wait for Sunday, because on Sunday everyone gets free tea.’

Kharemaster felt that Manutai was not getting enough to eat. This time when you go I’ll give you some money so that—.’ But Manutai interrupted him. ‘No, no, Anna. The other poor girls in the boarding wait for their meals. Why should I be different?’

Aai and Anna were impressed by Manutai's words. Every Saturday, as was usual, Kharemaster brought a basketful of guavas, sugarcane sticks and berries; the children feasted on these to their hearts' content. The holidays seemed to go by very quickly, and soon it was time for Manutai to go back. Kharemaster wrote to Hingane, 'Manutai will reach Pune on the fourteenth at two p.m. Please make arrangements to meet her at the tonga-stand and take her to Hingane.'

Manutai got ready to leave. She was seen off with one large tin of laddus and two new saris in her trunk. This was repeated six months later. The end of the first year brought the good news that Manutai had passed her ninth standard examination. Kharemaster's chest swelled with pride. Now he was sure that Manutai would complete her Matriculation examination.

One day, there was a huge commotion in Ghodnadi, on the main Pune-Ahmednagar road. The entire neighbourhood converged on the road to find out what was happening. The young son of *batliwallah* Ibrahim was being dragged along the road by four soldiers. The boy was screaming. Ibrahim ran after them, wildly beating on his chest in agony. He grabbed onto his son's hand and tried to drag him back. The soldiers lashed at his hands with their whips. Ibrahim collapsed on the road, crying loudly as the soldiers took his son away. Ibrahim was left helplessly beating his head on the ground and cursing the soldiers.

The World War had begun in Europe in 1914. The British government had a recruitment drive all over India. The order went out to the local officers that as many young men as possible were to be rounded up and sent off to war. The officers were enticed with promises of gifts and promotions in proportion to the numbers that they enrolled. The mamledar at Ghodnadi kept his eyes peeled for young boys. He overlooked his own son, of course, but saw the son of his neighbour, *baltiwallah* Ibrahim. It was he who gave the order that Ibrahim's son be taken away. The whole town was defenceless in the face of this order. When they began corralling the young farmers who came to the Saturday market, the farmers stopped bringing their wares to the market. Then the mamledar sent his soldiers directly to the villages to round up the young men.

One day a villager named Kasha, suddenly burst into Kharemaster's house. Kharemaster had often seen Kasha in the village as he made the rounds, delivering loads of hay to the townspeople.

Kharemaster shouted, 'How dare you enter my house like this?'

With folded hands, Kasha prostrated himself before Kharemaster. He gesticulated wildly and covered his mouth, begging for silence. Kharemaster asked him through gestures what the matter was.

Kasha whispered, 'Our entire village has been taken to the front. I ran away. I'll go back when it's dark. Please, please let me stay till then.' He begged and pleaded. Kharemaster was a little afraid. If the police came after Kasha and found that he had let him hide in his house, his own situation would be worse than that of the *batliwallah*. But his heart melted when he looked at Kasha. He hid Kasha, and he himself kept guard outside. After it was dark, Kasha came out, gratefully touched Kharemaster's feet and crept away stealthily.

Kharemaster was ready to explode. The British have wrenched our freedom from us with the help of our own soldiers, he thought now they are sacrificing our young men to maintain their dominance over the world!

Baby Vishnu was born when Shanta was barely two years old. The household survived the two-month period of confinement because of Gopal, who was a tower of strength. But Indutai was very tired of these repeated pregnancies every other year. She implored, over and over again, that she didn't want any more children; Kharemaster realized how she felt but how was he to control his sexual desires? He could see no solution. He knew that it would be hard to provide for a large family and to educate all the children. He would vow to be celibate, but his passion always overruled his resolution. During the First World War, a terrible famine befell Ghodnadi. There was not a speck of grain available. Kharemaster had, as usual, laid in a supply of grain for the whole year, so they had some rice, dal, bajri and wheat left in the house, but they had to make it last. There were six mouths to feed. Earlier, one rupee had fetched twelve to fifteen seers of grain. So, even on a salary of thirty rupees, they had dined like lords. Now they were in danger of starving. People lived off yams and cactus roots. The prices of goods had sky-rocketed. Kharemaster did not know how he would cope, but he drew solace from the fact that at least Manutai was not suffering with them. The World War continued. The town received its consignment of rice only once a month; each household receiving only one seer!

Indutai's saris were torn. Of the two dhotis that Kharemaster had, only one was in good shape. The children, too, needed clothes. Kharemaster had no choice but to sell one of the gold ornaments. What would they do after that? How was he to provide milk for baby Vishnu? Occasionally, a farmer would come by with a small amount of milk to sell. Everyone scrambled to buy it. Later, on the mamledar's orders, his men began stopping the farmers on the outskirts of the town, taking all their milk and their sacks of grain directly to the mamledar's house. The poor farmers had to accept whatever the mamledar chose to pay them. Who was to complain and to whom? The farmers got fed up with this and stopped bringing anything openly.

Indutai, along with the other Brahmin ladies, was forced to gather cactus roots from the woods. Luckily, the cactus roots grew rampant outside the town so there was no shortage. Indutai fed everyone boiled or roasted yams; their afternoon snack was roasted cactus roots.

Kharemaster took Mathu and Nana with him to the Saturday market to see if there was any food available that they could buy. One farmer had brought a new-born baby in a basket. The baby had not even opened its eyes yet with tears in his eyes, the farmer entreated each passer-by, 'Please, please, won't you buy my baby?' Just at that moment, the missionary saheb happened to be roaming through the market. Two Christian boys, each carrying sacks full of grain on their shoulders followed him. The farmer asked the saheb, 'Will you buy the baby?' The saheb agreed immediately. One of the Christian boys gave the farmer two seers of grain. Kharemaster, Mathu and Nana watched all this. The saheb noticed Kharemaster and enquired after him. With the tip of his cane he touched the children's stomachs. 'Hello, how are you?' he asked smilingly. The frightened children just nodded. Kharemaster also smiled politely. The saheb left with the baby. The farmer sobbed bitterly. Mathu looked on, with a tear stained face. She

clung to Anna in fear. 'Anna, you won't give us away to the saheb, will you?' Kharemaster held them close. 'No, my children, never.'

The missionary saheb left. Kharemaster struggled with conflicting thoughts. The children bought by the missionary would grow up in an orphanage; they would become Christians. Yet, because of the missionary, they would live instead of starving to death. So really, shouldn't one say that the missionary was kind? Why hadn't any of the rich people in the market shown the same spirit that the missionary had?

At home, Indutai began wearing her torn nine-yard saris like six-yard saris. 'I don't have to go out anywhere. What's wrong in wearing it this way in the house?' she said matter of factly. Kharemaster was impressed by her accommodating attitude. He began wearing his torn dhoti at night, and his good one to work during the day. From time to time, he was tempted to ask the saheb for a raise. But his pride came in the way of such obsequious behaviour.

He was curious, though, how the saheb had grain to buy children, when people had nothing to eat. Gangarammaster provided the answer. The missions are constantly sent food and money from abroad. Why? To attract more members to their flock! And to make sure that no one in their flock starves!' Kharemaster was stunned. He had no idea that the missionaries in India were getting money from a foreign source. He couldn't help being impressed by the missionary set-up that used the lure of food, medicine, knowledge and work for purposes of conversion. He was, himself, working for the missionaries. Was he then contributing to the decline of his own religion?

The missionary was aware of how Kharemaster's family was suffering due to the famine. He enquired after the well-being of the family and said, 'Mister Khare, do come to our church some day.' On another occasion, he called Kharemaster to his house. He told him how Christ's benevolence helps the poor, and how his teachings spread love and peace. He shared all this "knowledge" with Kharemaster. 'Do come to church this Sunday,' he insisted. Kharemaster understood the missionary's methods and was on his guard.

On Sunday, Kharemaster set off for the church, accompanied by Mathu and Nana. Indutai had never opposed Kharemaster in anything he did, but that day she protested. 'I don't like your going to the church at all. You hardly visit the Rama temple. Then why are you so eager to go there? What if the saheb asks you to become a Christian?'

'Don't be stupid! Am I going to become a Christian just because the saheb asks me to? I just want to see the fun. No one becomes a Christian by going to church and no one is a Hindu because he goes to a temple. Faith and God are within oneself.'

Kharemaster entered the church, leading his children by the hand. There was silence in the church, and the atmosphere was tranquil. Kharemaster looked around. He was impressed by all he saw. When the congregation rose, so did Kharemaster and the children. The missionary saheb welcomed everyone. Then the congregation sang hymns and recited the Lord's Prayer. The missionary saheb gave the sermon. At the end they said 'amen' and walked out of the church in an ordered way. When Kharemaster and the children came home, Indutai angrily ordered the children 'Make sure you wash before you come in.'



Soon the missionary saheb sent Kharemaster a message. 'Let's go for a walk this evening.' And, that evening, he showed up at Kharemaster's house, on his bicycle. He had hung a lantern on the handlebars of the bicycle. In those days there was no electricity in Ghodnadi. The streets were dimly lit by kerosene lamps; outside the town there was pitch darkness. Kharemaster left with the missionary saheb and was gone for a very long time. Darkness fell. It was well past midnight, and still there was no sign of Kharemaster. Fearful of what must have befallen her husband, Indutai started weeping. Finally, he returned at dawn. His body was covered with blood. 'Oh, my God, what happened? Did you fall down?' Indutai wept even more.

"Why are you crying like this? I've won the war." Kharemaster laughed in reply.

'What do you mean?' asked Indutai, as she began removing the cactus thorns from his body. Kharemaster explained. The saheb had taken him far out of the way. He lit the lantern when darkness fell; its light was barely enough to light the path under their feet. The saheb talked of Christ's greatness. Then, slyly, he began trying to convert Kharemaster. 'Give yourself to Jesus. He will take care of all your burdens.' Kharemaster retaliated by stating that the teachings of Christ were the same as those of the Hindu saints. The two argued vehemently; seeing that Kharemaster did not budge from his position, the saheb became silent, and, in a few minutes took off on his cycle. He did not even have the courtesy to light Kharemaster's way to the main road.

From that day, Kharemaster was on the blacklist of the missionary saheb. One day Gangarammaster mentioned casually. The saheb is looking for another drawing master.' Kharemaster was very worried. Finally, he was able to keep his job only because they were unable to find another teacher. But his pay was cut by twenty rupees. At home there were seven or eight mouths to feed. Although the famine was over, it was impossible to make ends meet on a salary of only ten rupees. One by one Kharemaster had to sell the gold ornaments. He was at his wits' end.

Mathu, Shanta, Nana and little Vishnu were sitting in front of the house when Kharemaster returned from work one day. He noticed that their clothes were in shreds; their faces looked drawn. His heart was wrenched. His neighbour, Bukharali, was standing outside his house, scratching his cow's throat and petting her. Kharemaster stopped and asked casually, "Your cow gets enough grass to eat, right?" Bukharali said, 'Yes, by the grace of Allah. In this famine, hundreds of animals were sold, but I stood firm. I would not sell my cow. Even in this famine, this cow gave my babies milk.' As Bukharali spoke, a man came by with an empty vessel. 'Miya, do you have any milk?'

'Yes. I do.' Saying so, Bukharali gave him milk. The man paid him and departed. Kharemaster had a brainwave. He took his leave of Bukharali and went his way. That evening, he said, 'Indu, let's start a milk business. Villagers all over are selling their cattle. Let's buy two buffaloes. We'll be able to get them for a low price now.' The idea appealed to Indutai. 'But, how shall we get grass for them?'

The grass will grow as soon as it rains.'

'But if a Brahmin gets into the milk business, what will people—.

Kharemaster interrupted Indutai. 'Let them say what they like! Let them call us names! Are they going to feed our children? In any case, they'll have to come to us for milk. There's hardly any milk available.'

Indutai saw the logic of this. Gopal was listening to this exchange. He said, confidently, 'Anna, I'm used to milking. At Awaas, I was the one responsible for milking. I'll take charge of the milking here.' Kharemaster sold the last ornament and bought two buffaloes. The Brahmins called them names, but neither he nor Indutai cared. Deshpandemaster was very proud of him. 'Anna,' he said, 'I'll be your first customer.'

Indutai looked after the business meticulously. Kharemaster went a step further. He instructed Gopal to dry each vessel before milking so that there wouldn't be even a drop of water in the milk. When people realized that the milk from the Khares was better than what they otherwise got, they had more customers than they could handle.

Indutai learnt to do the milking herself. With the growing demand for milk, she thought that they should buy another buffalo. Every morning, Gopal took the animals to the river, washed them and milked them. He worked very cheerfully. He studied at night because his mornings and evenings were spent *in* milking. As Kharemaster was at school all day long, he was not able to help in the business, but he kept the accounts. Kharemaster was aware of how Indutai toiled—between the milk business, looking after the children, and the household chores, she worked incessantly—and he was troubled by it. Mathu used to attend her father's drawing class for an hour each morning. On the way she would take the cattle to graze in the large compound around the bungalow of one of their friends, where the grass had grown very tall. In the evening, as soon as school was over, Gopal would bring the cattle home. Kharemaster bought fodder for the cattle. As a result, the milk was even richer than before, and was in great demand. The business flourished. The income from the business was many times Kharemaster's ten-rupee pay. Now the family was looked upon with respect. Indutai was so involved with the house and business that she didn't have a spare moment. Although Kharemaster was very proud of Indu, he couldn't bear to see how she toiled. But the needs of his large family left him with no choice.

In due course, Mathu also passed the Vernacular Final examination. Gopal was in the seventh standard, like Manutai, Mathu began attending the Madamsaheb's special class to learn English. By this time, Deshpandemaster had been transferred out of Ghodnadi. Kharemaster had started corresponding with the secretary at Hingane to get Mathu admitted there. He wrote back to say that Mathu would be admitted to the ninth standard. Kharemaster was relieved. Manutai, who was now in the matric class, came as usual during her school break. When she left, she took Mathu with her.

Two more children, Shanta and Vishnu, had been born after Nana. Now, Indutai was expecting again. She was really fed up with these constant pregnancies. The housework never seemed to end, the business was expanding, and now she had to cope with another pregnancy! She was desperate. How was she to manage? She toiled from four in the morning to late at night. Kharemaster was laden with guilt knowing that he was responsible for her suffering; because of this he would be short-tempered, thus adding to her woes.

Kharemaster had been a strict disciplinarian with the first two children, but now he could not maintain the same watchfulness. He was satisfied as long as the children did their schoolwork.

This time, Indutai's labour proved very difficult, maybe because she was physically exhausted. The midwife was unable to cope. Indutai's very life seemed to be in danger.

Kharemaster was both terrified, and remorseful! What if Indutai died? The entire family would be destroyed! And what would happen to the children? When the midwife finally gave up, he called the doctor, who delivered a stillborn infant and saved Indutai. Kharemaster heaved a sigh of relief. On the one hand he was sad about the stillborn baby, and on the other he was secretly relieved—and ashamed of these feelings. In just twelve days Indutai left her bed. Gopal entreated her, Maw-shi, please don't get up. I'm here,' but she wouldn't listen. With her iron resolve, she was back at work. She did the cooking, Gopal did everything else. Now that the business was doing well, they hired a maid, Changuna, to do the heavy work.

The examinations at Hingane were over. Indutai and Kharemaster waited eagerly for the girls who would soon be home. But Kharemaster faced a new set of problems. Up to now the girls had received scholarships which covered all their expenses. Where would Manutai go to college? Would he be able to bear the expenses? If he didn't send her to college, should he get her married? How could he look for a match for her?

Finally, the girls were home. The house overflowed with joy at their very presence. Their parents couldn't do enough for them. The girls had become a source of wonder in the town. They sat in the kitchen and regaled the family with anecdotes about Hingane. Kharemaster, along with the other children, listened avidly, but realized with a tinge of sadness that all the girls' prancing and chatter was around their mother.

One day Mathu announced, 'Anna, now I can ride a bicycle.' Kharemaster was surprised. 'Really?' was all he said. A few days later, Mathu was chatting with her mother when she heard Anna call out to her. 'Mathu, do you want to ride a bicycle?' Kharemaster was holding a brand new bicycle. Mathu danced with joy. 'Anna, where did you get the cycle?' Kharemaster had sent a man to Ahmednagar to bring the cycle as a present for his daughter. In Ghodnadi, the missionary saheb was the only one who rode a cycle. It was of course unheard of for a woman to ride a cycle. Mathu tucked her sari between her legs and got on the bike. Indutai and the other children looked on with pride and wonder. Mathu went on the main road as far as the Seventeen Pillar Bridge. People on both sides of the road stopped to watch her. Mathu was very proud of herself. She went back and forth four or five times so that everyone could see her. Anna's heart swelled with pride. The onlookers watched in amazement

Half way through the holidays, the much awaited letter arrived from Hingane. Kharemaster tore it open eagerly. 'Congratulations! Manorama Khare has passed the matriculation examination in the second class. Our institution has decided to start classes at the college level. If you wish to enrol her, please let us know. Manorama Khare will be admitted to the first year class.'

Kharemaster felt his dream had been fulfilled. He said to Indutai, 'Our daughter is truly fortunate. I said I'd educate her as far as her BA But I never dreamt it would be this easy. Now let's have some fun,' he whispered. Just then Manutai came there. 'Well, Manutai, do you think you'll pass? Or did you just play all year long with your friends?' Manutai said, 'Anna, I really studied hard. I thought my exams went well. But I don't understand why the result is not out yet.' No one spoke for a moment 'I've been so uneasy since yesterday.'

Anna pretended to be serious. 'Manutai, there seems to be a problem.'

The letter's here? Why didn't you tell me? I've passed, haven't I?

'I don't know how to tell you ...'

Manutai's face was crestfallen. Tears swam in her eyes. Khare-master couldn't bear to continue this charade. He congratulated her and gave her the letter. Manutai was ecstatic. 'Anna, please, may I join the college, please?'

Well, what do you think? Will I send you?'

Thank God, I know you will.'

The vacation was over very soon. Kharemaster decided to send the girls to Pune in the newly started lorry service.

Ghodnadi had never seen a motor lorry before. In those days, there were very few motor cars even in a large city like Pune. The only vehicles were tongas and buggies. The mail, too, was delivered in tongas. Now Ghodnadi had its first lorry. All the villagers gathered to see this strange thing. Hanmantrao, the driver, proudly told them that his lorry would make daily trips to Pune and asked, 'Are any of you people coming with me to Pune tomorrow?' Kharemaster replied, 'Yes, my two daughters will go with you.'

'But where should they be dropped? The lorry goes only as far as the Pune stop.'

That's fine. They'll manage from that point.'

As soon as Hanmantrao started the lorry, the villagers ran helter-skelter, frightened by its roar. Hanmantrao stopped the lorry on the side of the road and the noise ceased. Then, the villagers gathered around it again. They pelted Hanmantrao with questions. Where is the horse? Where is the bullock? What pulled this monster? How did it stop without a bridle? How did that one wheel steer it to the right or left? The bolder ones peeped inside the lorry. They were frightened as well as awestruck by this monster that roared as it moved.

At three the next afternoon, the girls were ready with their luggage, snacks and tiffin box. Indutai was scared because the girls were travelling in this unfamiliar vehicle, but Kharemaster had already made the arrangements. Indutai, Kharemaster and the children came to the lorry stand to see the girls off. Many of the village folk advised them against using this mode of transportation. 'Master, sending your girls in this is not right. There's no guarantee this lorry will reach Pune safely. Why do you need this headache?' Kharemaster was, however, firm in his resolve. 'Nothing will happen. They'll reach safely,'-he responded. He reassured the girls sitting in the lorry, 'Everything will be fine.' But, when the lorry started, with its whirring sound, his heart was in his mouth. Indu-tai's eyes moistened. The girls grabbed each other's hands. The crowd watched, amazed.

The sight of this monstrous vehicle and the deafening noise it made scared the living daylights out of everyone on the road to Pune. All the way to Pune, bullock carts, animals and people fled from its path. Once the girls settled down, they watched this spectacle in amusement. Kharemaster returned home with a sense of fulfilment. He knew that the girls would receive an excellent education at Hingane.

Kharemaster had arranged for Nana, too, to study in Pune. He stayed at Kharemaster's cousin's house. Kharemaster had made enquiries at a neighbourhood *khanaval*—an eating-house where visitors are provided with meals on a monthly basis at a very competitive price, sometimes even at private homes. Although the monthly rate at the

khanaval was two rupees, Kharemaster offered his cousin eight rupees a month for Nana's meals, so that Nana would not lack for anything. His cousin also assured Kharemaster that he would take good care of Nana. Kharemaster was content that three of his children were receiving excellent education.

A year went by. Manutai wrote. "We visit Nana once a fortnight on Saturday. He has become very thin. This time he cried a lot. He doesn't get even two square meals." Kharemaster was devastated. Indutai begged, 'Please bring Nana back. I fear for his life. Education is not everything.' Kharemaster left immediately for Pune in a very disturbed state of mind. Where would Nana live if not with his cousin? What if he continued to live there but ate at the khanaval? He kept telling himself that he must handle everything diplomatically.

Nana was playing a game of marbles in the alley. Kharemaster sobbed when he saw Nana's emaciated body. As soon as he noticed his father, Nana ran to him. Kharemaster clasped Nana to him. 'How thin you are, my child.' Nana hung his head to hide his tears. Kharemaster asked him, 'Have you eaten?' Nana made no response. Kharemaster took him to a khanaval and fed him.

Watching him, Kharemaster was plagued by an old memory. At the beginning of his second term, Nana had protested that he didn't want to go to Pune. But even then he had not told his parents that he didn't get enough to eat. On the day he left, he had a fever. But Kharemaster had thought that he just didn't want to leave the comforts of home, and had spanked him and forced him to go to Pune with the girls. Have I become so callous, he wondered? If only Manutai had found this out earlier. But Nana had never confided in his sisters before this. When Manutai had gone to meet Nana this time, she had taken a number of things for him to eat. Nana had cried only when Manutai had delved deeper. Then he confessed that he didn't get enough to eat.

On the way home with Nana, Kharemaster had an idea. He went to the Superintendent of the Nutan Marathi Vidyalaya, and asked his advice. Superintendent Patwardhan, who was very sympathetic to students said, 'Khare, if its only a question of a place to stay, he can stay with *us*.' Kharemaster felt that his prayers had been answered. 'He will get his meals at the khanaval and live with you. Is that all right?'

Patwardhan agreed. Now Kharemaster had to inform his cousin. As soon as they stepped in his house, the cousin said, "You should have let us know you were coming. We would have waited for you."

Now we have already eaten. And Nana, where were you? Shouldn't you show up on time to eat?' Kharemaster was angry with this hypocrisy, but swallowing his anger he replied, 'Nana and I have eaten.'

'Oh, when did you come? Where did you take the lad to eat?'

Kharemaster was short with his cousin. 'I'm taking Nana away.'

The cousin said, 'That will be the best thing. Your son doesn't study at all; just plays all day. It's best if you look after him yourself.'

Kharemaster asked Nana to gather his belongings. As if he had just thought of it, the cousin said, 'Oh, yes! If you could just pay this month's eight rupees—'

'Eight rupees? For this month?'

“Well, actually only five or six days are over. But pay me for the month and our account will be clear.” Kharemaster held his anger in check and paid up in silence. He got Nana settled at the Patwardhans and returned to Ghodnadi.

But Kharemaster could not stop thinking of Nana. Should such a young boy eat the unvarying food cooked at a *khanaval*? Nana was used to the delicious, nutritious meals his mother prepared. Of course he wanted Nana to get a good education, but at what cost? What if Nana’s health suffered? If Nana were to be brought back to Ghodnadi, his very future would be in jeopardy. Education was not just his own obsession; it was also for his son’s good. How was he to achieve that? This problem would also arise with respect to the other children! There were no opportunities in Ghodnadi. What if they moved to Pune and all stayed together? But how would they survive? All these problems had been created because he had too many children. But was that something he could have helped? The questions were numerous but no solution seemed to be in sight.

Karve University for Women held its degree examination. Manutai Khare graduated with honours and was offered a teaching post in Pune’s Kanyashala at a salary of sixty rupees. Kharemaster was proud of his daughter but wondered if it was right to make one’s daughter earn a living? In those days, even the Pune-kars could not accept that a woman would hold a job. The Kanyashala was in Sadashiv Peth, in the heart of the Brahmin locality. The only woman teacher in the school was a widow, who taught sewing; the other teachers were men. Most girls in Pune were married by the time they were ten years old. How could Manutai, unmarried at eighteen, escape being noticed as she passed that way to work every day?

Indutai felt that it was better to get Manutai married, now that she was eighteen. She told Kharemaster so. He was faced with an awkward question. Who was to find a match for the girl, where and how? Finally, he decided to talk to Manutai herself. When he had decided to educate the girls, he had thought that once they were educated, they would have their own opinions, they would make independent decisions, shape their own lives. He would sit back and watch in satisfaction. But, as the girls did become independent, as they began voicing their opinions, and following their own course, Kharemaster felt he had grown apart from his own daughters. He found it difficult to understand how they thought and how they decided on a course of action. He said to Manutai, ‘Manutai, my dream was to make you a graduate. You have fulfilled that. Now if you want to get married—.’ Manutai interrupted. ‘No, Anna, I’m not going to marry. I will work.’

‘But how will you stay alone in Pune?’

‘Annasaheb Karve has told me that he’ll give me a room in his *wada*. I can go to the Kanyashala from there.’

Kharemaster felt relieved. He caught a hopeful glimpse of the future. If Manutai lived in Pune, at least Nana could go to school there. Gopal had completed his Vernacular Final. He wanted to become a teacher. Now he could attend the Training College in Pune. Manutai could make a home with all of them in the Karve-wada. But how long could Manutai work? What if circumstances changed and they were forced to break up the establishment?

Gopal said, ‘Anna, if you buy me two buffaloes, I can earn some money in the milk business.’

Finally Manutai, Nana and Gopal set up house in the Karviewada. They took comfort in their being together and all three settled in. Kharemaster felt that it was truly a miracle that each time his principles were put to the test, fate intervened and pointed at a solution.

Like Manutai, Mathu passed the Karve University examination. She received several awards and obtained a teaching post in the Kanyashala in Pune. It became clear that the family should move to Pune; the older daughters would have a sense of security and the other children would receive better schooling. Kharemaster found a suitable house in Pune and brought the family there. He didn't want the girls to shoulder the family burden just because they were earning members. Indutai felt that they should start a milk business at Pune just as they had at Ghodnadi, so they moved the business there. Two sons and three daughters had been born to them after Nana. Kharemaster, who always worried about his ever-increasing family, decided to stay behind, by himself, in Ghodnadi on his ten-rupee pay, and to visit Pune just once a fortnight.

Manutai had been teaching in the Kanyashala for two years. Annasaheb Karve said to her one day. There's an opening for a teacher at the Government Girls' High School at Amravati, in Varhad. Will you go to teach there? All the other teachers are graduates of statutory universities. This is a great opportunity to show that our girls are just as well qualified, and our future graduates will be able to get government jobs. And most importantly, there you will earn the same as the others. The boarding is in the school premises so there will be no problem about a place to stay. Do think about it.'

Manutai had learnt determination from her father. She responded immediately, 'I'm ready to go.'

Kharemaster learnt for the first time that his daughters might not be eligible for government jobs because they were not graduates of accredited government institutions. So he happily gave his blessing to Manutai's decision. This development, however, gave rise to new doubts. Had he been wrong in sending his daughters to the Karve institution? What was the alternative? But for these facilities, the girls would have remained uneducated! Was the aim of education to broaden then" minds or just to prepare them for a job?

The tonga that was to take Manutai to the railway station drew up outside the house. The entire family came to the verandah to see Manutai set off for Amravati. Kharemaster watched from the sidelines, with a heavy heart. His very first fledgling was leaving the nest he had built, on her maiden flight. Were her wings strong enough to carry her to Amravati, five hundred miles away? If not... Manutai, however, seemed very confident. She touched Aai and Anna's feet, asked for then" blessings and climbed into the tonga. She checked that she had the train ticket and held it up to show to her mother. She called out, 'Farewell Aai, Anna. Bye-bye little ones.'

The tonga left. Everyone except Anna, went back into the house. He remained there, his eyes glued to the tonga till it was but a speck on the road. His twenty-year-old daughter had set out to face the world, on the strength of the education he had made possible. He felt justifiably proud. Manutai, however had eyes only for the road ahead! Kharemaster felt a stab of pain; then he turned around and went inside.

Mathu decided to enrol for her M.A. examinations at Karve University. The topic she chose for her thesis was the theory of literature. She had to work hard to get articles and

reference books, and to discuss her thesis with learned professors. All this she did with great enthusiasm. She knew how hard her mother worked; to lighten her load, she took over many of the household chores. To save money, she began sewing clothes for her brothers and sisters, and stopped only when they made fun of her clumsy needlework.

The unmarried, seventeen-year-old Mathu also became an object of public scrutiny as she walked to the school everyday. With her students, though, she was very popular. She was a dedicated teacher and she treated the girls with affection and kindness. She did scold them occasionally in order to discipline them about their studies, but even this was done lovingly. During the recess, she played energetic games of *khokho* and *hututu* with the girls, so they looked upon her with a special closeness.

Mathu's popularity in the school extended even to the home. Her students invited her to their homes on festival days such as Diwali, Ganpati and Mangalagouri. They sent her *prasad* from Satyanarayan jiujas performed in their homes. She was given presents on feast days—baskets of fruit, sweetmeats and other delicacies. The parents of her students spoke very warmly of Mathu to Kharemaster. Then naturally he and Indutai would remember Manutai, who was at Amravati, five hundred miles away. Soon there was a letter from Manutai, and when they read it, their pride in their first-born knew no bounds. Manutai wrote:

*Respected Anna,*

*Normally I write every fortnight, but this time, I am four days late as I've been very busy. The public library here had arranged my lecture and I was busy preparing for that. I'm writing this letter the very day after the lecture, as I know you will be worried. I'm enclosing a clipping from the local paper on my lecture; that will give you some idea of how it went. I feel at home here and I'm doing well. Don't worry about anything. Please convey my sashtang namaskar to dear Aai. Blessings to dear Mathu, Nana, Shanta and Vishnu.*

*Obediently yours,*

*Manu*

Kharemaster read the letter to Indutai. And then they began to read the clipping:

REPORTER'S NOTES: This year, during the festival of Navratra, the public library celebrated Shardotsav with a lecture series. There were some notable lectures as part of this series. Special mention must be made of a talk by Miss Manutai Khare, a teacher in the Government Girls' High School. Miss Khare's youth, and the impressive topic of her lecture Vedic Women' aroused a great deal of curiosity amongst the educated. We are happy to report that her erudition, her simple way of explaining the subject, her command of the language, clear diction and logical reasoning made her lecture outstanding. The audience went home singing the praises of this young speaker. The Government Girls' High School at Amravati is situated on a hill top, away from the town. It is especially worth congratulating Miss Khare who participates fully in the cultural movement of this town although she lives on the distant school campus. The other teachers in this school are all graduates of government accredited universities. We learn that Miss Khare is the



only graduate of Karve University. If Karve University continues to produce graduates of this calibre, it will not be long before the fame of that institution spreads.

Kharemaster and Indutai were in seventh heaven on reading this. But their bubble of happiness was soon to be pricked. One day, Mathu received an unexpected letter.

*Daryapur*

*To my dear friend Mathu Khare,*

*Greetings! This is your friend Chandri Jagtap writing after a very long time. Do you remember me? We were together at Hingane, in the ninth standard. I don't know if you ever think of me, but I often think of you. One afternoon, at Hingane, you were hungry. You bought chane kurmure from the pocket money your father had given you. As you stood eating it, Dwarkabai, our teacher, came by. I was right behind you. She said, 'You are daughters of a poor family. How can you be so hungry all the time?' She went her way. You broke down and cried. I came to you and comforted you. Then we munched on the chane as we walked to our rooms. Remember?*

*You'll wonder why I haven't written to you for so long. What can I say? My father got me married off and that was the end of my education. My new life and my in-laws kept me very busy. Mathutai, your father is different, he always encouraged your education—yours and Manu's. That brings me to the purpose of this letter. I need to talk to you about Manu. Mathutai, my maternal cousin, a young lawyer named Vitthal Chavan, lives at Amravati. He's tremendously enthusiastic—he likes to participate in all sorts of things—meetings, lectures, discourses, community celebrations—you name it. He sometimes writes articles for the newspaper. He met Manutai during some such activity about eight or ten months ago. Their friendship has grown so much that, news of it has reached us at Daryapur. Everyone at my home is uneasy about this. Grandma is especially upset. She goes on and on, 'My boy has been hoodwinked by that Brahmin girl. If she so much as steps in this house—.'*

*Mathu, I don't want to say it, but I do feel this inter caste marriage will not work. You decide whether to let Manutai know. Everything else is fine. On the agricultural front, the cotton is plentiful this year. Please write to me.*

*Yours,*

*Chandrika Jagtap*

*Dear Manutai,*

*Please accept affectionate greetings from Mathu.*

*I'm stepping out of bounds today, but please don't be angry. Do you recall a girl named Chandrika Jagtap who was in my class at Hingane? I received a letter from her, which I readout to Anna when he came this afternoon from Ghodnadi. He was very upset. He said aloud, 'Marriage outside one's caste is no good.' This struck me as strange. Anna had always said there should be no caste distinctions and he followed that in his behaviour. Then why was he opposed to such a marriage? Yet, I didn't have the courage to argue with him.*

*But Aai and Anna must have discussed this because, later when I returned home, Aai said, 'Mathu, write to Manutai. Tell her not to marry this man. Your father is right. Manutai and this man have nothing in common. Everything about them is different—their food, their way of living. He eats meal. Will she be able to cook it or eat it? Her husband and in-laws will be angry with her if she doesn't. How can these two be happy if they get married? And there's another thing. If Manutai goes ahead with this unsuitable marriage, it will be a real problem to get the others married. There is no doubt that untouchability is senseless. But two people from different castes can never be happy together. Write to Manutai straight away. Your father is very uneasy and I don't approve either.*

*Anna won't write to you, but seeing the situation here, I've taken the liberty of writing. So please don't be angry.*

*Everything else is fine. Do bring a crate of oranges when you come.*

*Yours, Mathu*

*Dear Mathutai,*

*Heartfelt blessings.*

*I received your letter a week ago. I couldn't reply earlier as I had gone to Nagpur with some of the students. Also, I needed time to think. I returned two days ago, and yesterday I wrote to Anna saying I wasn't going ahead with this relationship, and not to worry at all.*

*Actually, people have made a mountain out of a molehill. Recently, the thought of marriage has crossed my mind—that's true. Chavan is a fine young man. I met him at the public library, where he is on the managing committee. We talked a little and people at the library saw us. Their gossip had the effect of forcing us closer together, when, I at least, had nothing specific in mind, Chavan was responsible for arranging lectures for the library and he came to pick me up in a tonga and dropped me back at the boarding at night. Then the townsfolk and the other teachers in the boarding started talking—well, you can imagine the rest.*

*But to be honest, I don't think he's a bad match. And the thought never crossed my mind that the caste difference would create any problem in the future in our relationship.*

*But Mathu, here's something I have realized recently. The older generation teaches their children valuable lessons. They teach us to speak the truth, to behave with honour, and to be unafraid, but when they themselves are faced with difficult situations, they don't have the guts to follow their own precepts. And when the children try to behave exactly the way they've been taught, those same elders hold them back. Everyone thinks this is the gap between two generations. But actually it is the gap caused by age—it's the gap between the opinions of a person in his twenties and one in his fifties.*

*We'll talk more when I'm home during the holidays. Please convey my namaskar to Aai-Anna, and blessings to all the little ones. I'll certainly bring oranges when I come.*

*Yours,*

*Manutai*

This little storm subsided quickly, but in its wake it taught Khare-master a lesson. He could no longer shape his children's lives. Even if he insisted on holding the reins, he would not be able to guide them in the direction he wanted.

Mathu enrolled her sister Shanta in the Kanyashala after she herself began teaching there. Even after so many years, society was dragging its feet on the education of women. Parents enrolled their daughters in school, but withdrew them when they were twelve; most were married off. In general, the only ones who remained in school were older child widows. As a result, many of Mathu's students were older than she was. Some of these widows joined the LCPS programme of medicine after their Matriculation. Mathu realized that if Shanta wanted to become a doctor, she should not continue in the Kanyashala. Although the Kanyashala had classes up to the Matriculation level, it was not recognized by the government. As a result, frequently, when their girls were in the ninth or tenth standard, their parents would transfer them from the Kanyashala to the Hujurpaga School. The Hujurpaga School was recognized by the government; its students could continue their study in the field of medicine. Mathu was of course deeply grateful to the Karve institution, and in those days she often had to entreat parents to send their daughters to the Kanyashala. Yet, she considered what was best for Shanta, and at the end of the year she enrolled her in the New English School, which was recognized by the government. Kharemaster was impressed with Mathu's foresight; at the same time he confessed to himself that this would not have occurred to him.

Two years went by. Mathu was appointed the Superintendent of the Kanyashala. She was very capable. As a result, both the reputation of the school as well as her own self-confidence grew. Mathu was extremely enthusiastic about many things. In addition to the great interest she took in the girls' studies, she was an eager participant in their games, and physical exercises, and in other programmes of the school. Sometimes she went overboard in her enthusiasm and had to face criticism. People were, of course, used to seeing the girls play jhimma, phugdya and other such essentially girls' games. One day, however, Mathutai tucked her sari between her legs, tied her sari padar tightly around herself and appeared on the school ground brandishing a big stick. She began playing, and teaching to the girls, the game of lathi-kathi, which was a variation on fencing, an essentially rigorous and masculine sport. Even the local newspapers commented on this. Naturally, news of this reached Kharemaster's ears. He didn't know whether he should admire her for her innovative spirit or whether he should try to hold her enthusiasm in check.

Mathu was working on her thesis in full swing. She was hardworking, diligent and painstaking by nature. And her father had always inspired her to seek greater heights. For her thesis, she made an in-depth study of the original works of pioneering geniuses in the field of the theory of literature. She gladly accepted invitations to talk about her research. Once, a learned professor from a college in Pune was presiding at a public meeting. He was himself a famous orator and writer. To show off her erudition, a few minutes after she began speaking, Mathutai let forth a stream of Sanskrit quotations.

The professor was startled and, without thinking, interrupted her. "What? What's that?" Mathu halted in surprise and looked at him. He became aware of what he'd done and said, 'Sorry! Please continue. I've never heard a woman speak such exquisite

Sanskrit so eloquently.’ Kharemaster was also among the audience. He was, naturally, very moved by the praise heaped on his daughter by such a learned gentleman.

This professor grew to be very fond of his protégée and the relationship lasted many years. Like Mathu, he was very interested in many social issues. Mathu began working with him to promote literacy among untouchables and adults. Her interests were so varied, that naturally the number of visitors who came to their house to meet Mathu kept growing. They were from all walks of life, yet Kharemaster felt that he couldn’t identify with any of them, and began leaving the house whenever there were visitors. The sarrafi store of the Marwari, Tarachand, was right across Kharemaster’s house. Kharemaster would sit on the stool in the Marwari’s verandah. He chatted with the Marwari while he kept an eye on his own house. He felt that Mathu had, through this stream of worthy visitors, enriched the house greatly.

One day, as Kharemaster and Tarachand watched, a two-horse, four-wheeled carriage drew up in front of the house; Mathu climbed in it and left Tarachand was very impressed. Then Kharemaster remarked in a deliberately casual tone. That is Sardar Rashingkar’s carriage. He wants Mathu to tutor his wife, and has agreed to provide transportation both ways.’

Soon after that, every other day, Sardar Rasne’s car was seen, parked outside their house. Mathu was tutoring Sardar Rasne’s daughter. Indutai, in her simple way, often felt like doing the *drushta*—a ritual that was supposed to ward off evil spirits and protect the person.

One day, during the monsoon, Kharemaster came home with one side of his clothes completely covered with mud. Indutai was very concerned. “What happened? Did you fall down? Are you hurt?” Kharemaster laughed. ‘Not at all. Your daughter splattered me with this mud.’ Indutai became angry with him. “What kind of talk is this? I don’t like it at all.’ Still Kharemaster laughed. “I wear this mud with pride. You know that because of the monsoon there is mud everywhere on the roads. A car passed by and splattered me with mud! And who do you think was in the car? Mathu! Our daughter, Mathu! She didn’t even notice me.’

Kharemaster felt it was no longer possible to make rules for Mathu, his very capable daughter. He decided never to tell her what to do. But when the time came he forgot his resolve. One day Mathu said to her father, ‘Anna, you told us to let you know when we were ready to get married?’

That’s right.’

Then will you approach Purandare for me?’

Kharemaster was surprised. ‘Purandare? Who is Purandare? What does he do? Where does he live?’

‘He’s right here in Pune. He’s studying to be a lawyer.’

Kharemaster almost asked Mathu how she knew him, but held himself in check- Since his daughter was asking him to approach the young man, she apparently didn’t know him personally. Yet, obviously she must have liked him and wanted (his alliance. He had believed that women did not have very strong desires as men did. That belief received a rude shock today. Thank God his daughter had selected someone of the same caste!

Mathu was friendly with a woman who lived in a wada near the school. Sometimes on her way to school she used to visit her. Slowly she became aware that a man, who lived nearby, was interested in her. One day she casually mentioned this to her friend, who told her that the man's name was Purandare, that he was a decent fellow and that he was soon going to complete his law degree. Gradually, Mathu also began to feel attracted to Purandare. But she had never once spoken to him. She asked her father if he would approach Purandare on her behalf, and waited eagerly to see what would happen.

A month or so went by. Even though they had never spoken, the more she saw him, the more attracted she became. Finally she could not contain herself. She asked her father what had happened.

Kharemaster said, 'Mathutai, I made thorough inquiries about that man. He is not suitable for you. You will never be happy in this marriage. He doesn't have a single good quality to commend him. You are a determined young woman, ambitious, and you have a spark—you won't be able to put up with it.'

Mathu, however, could not stop thinking about Purandare. She decided that Anna must have asked random people about Purandare; such people generally had nothing good to say about others. Clearly Anna's information came from a biased source. She, on the other hand, saw only his good side and her fascination for him kept growing. She simply could not get him out of her mind, and she turned a deaf ear to her father's words of wisdom.

Gradually, Mathu and Purandare began seeing each other secretly, after school was over. Naturally, she would be late getting home. Indutai noticed this. Until then, if she was going to be late, she'd tell them where she was going and when she'd return. Now, no matter how late she was, she gave no explanations. Indutai was uneasy and she would get angry. She felt that girls should return home before dark. But she didn't have the courage to speak up to Mathu, who was so responsible in other ways. Kharemaster was in the same predicament. He would wait for her and convince himself that she was involved with a hundred projects. Surely that was why she was late. Yet sometimes suspicion gnawed at him. Was Mathu involved with that man in spite of what he had said?

At last, one day Mathu went to Purandare's house. The house had only one small room with a kitchen attached to it. There were eight family members—Purandare himself, his sister and her children. The house reeked of poverty and filth. But Mathu's love was blind and her self-assurance strong. She felt that she would be able to improve things. And she continued to go there.

One day Purandare said to her, 'Stop giving your pay to your parents. Start putting it in the bank.'

Mathu was astonished! 'Why?'

'We will need it for ourselves.'

Mathu was shocked by this way of thinking. Yet, she rationalized, he was not entirely wrong. One day when they began talking about her thesis he said, 'You're not to go to Professor Barve.'

'What do you mean? Whose help shall I seek for my Sanskrit difficulties?'

'Ask me whatever you need to know. I'll tell you.'

Her eyes were forced open. You! You'll answer my Sanskrit questions? You've only studied Sanskrit up to the Matric level. What can you tell me about theoreticians such as Dandi and Bhamaha?

‘But I don’t approve at all of your seeking help from anybody else.’

Mathu was stunned. This man would control her entire existence if she became his wife. She shuddered. For a while she sat calmly, then she got up and said resolutely, ‘We will never be able to get along with each other. I am going away.’

Once again, Mathu began coming home before dark. Before leaving for school she began informing her parents where she would be going that evening. Her parents were most relieved. They began surmising what must have happened. One day Mathu herself said, ‘Anna, what you said about Purandare was so true.’

Had she continued to see him in spite of his disapproval? He decided not to press the point. Thank God! You’ve been saved.’

He realized, however, that, he was the one who had come out of this unscathed! But for how long? He did not comprehend the mysterious ways of love! Could one fall in love with just anyone? And would one want to hide it even from one’s own parents? He couldn’t fathom it and was restless. What if this happened again? At least this time his daughter had talked to him, consulted him. What if, one day, in the throes of love, she not only didn’t confide in him, but also felt that he was an impediment in her path!

Mathu was very well respected in the school both for her intellect and her wisdom. Yet, she was completely out of touch with some of the realities of life. One day, she found out why her mother looked so worried, and received a great shock. Indutai said, ‘Mathu, I just do not want to have any more children. This time, I’m afraid I won’t survive. Will you ask the doctor for some way out?’ The twenty-year-old unmarried Mathu began considering how she could help her mother in her pregnancy. After much thought, she went to a neighbouring doctor.

‘Doctor, my mother suffered a great deal in her previous two pregnancies. She is expecting again. Can you do something?’ The doctor explained patiently, ‘Mathutai, it’s all right that you said this to me, but don’t mention it to any other doctor. Abortion is a serious crime.’ Mathu was crestfallen. She returned home, dejected and disappointed. She related the conversation to her mother. Indutai was fully convinced that she would die; she began behaving as if she was winding up her worldly affairs. Even in the ninth month of her pregnancy, she continued to cook and manage the business with Gopal’s help, even though she could hardly stand the strain. Mathu would help her mother until it was time for her to go to school. But all day long she’d worry. Anna was at Ghodnadi. How would Aai manage? What if she died? A cold fear gripped Mathu’s heart.

Finally, in the ninth month, Indutai went into labour. Too weak to get up, she lay listlessly in bed. Evening fell. Indutai began to cry—her crying was strange, as if she was not aware of what was happening. The frightened children gazed helplessly at their weeping mother. Indutai held each one close, in turn. One after another, the children began crying too. Mathu was at her wits’ end. She wished desperately that Anna were here. Now the entire responsibility was on her shoulder. Gopal was not at home either.

‘Mathu, help me, the pain is really bad!’

‘Aai, I’ll do anything. Just tell me ...’

Indutai got up with an effort. She stood before the family altar and folded her hands in prayer. ‘Baba, I’m going to die. I’m leaving my babies in your care,’ she said with a grotesque smile on her face. Just then, as if God himself had taken pity on her. Dr. Deshmukh appeared. Dr. Deshmukh was the older son of Fouzdar Deshmukh. He had lived in Ghodnadi when he was child. Kharemaster had saved him from wasting his life. It was Kharemaster who had inspired him to study hard. Dr. Deshmukh was deeply grateful to Kharemaster. Today he was a respected doctor; in fact, it was Dr. Deshmukh that Gopal had gone to fetch.

Dr. Deshmukh immediately left on his bicycle and fetched a horse-drawn Victoria. He said to Mathutai, ‘Take Kaki to the Mission hospital in the Mangalwar Wada. I’ve already given the gariwallah directions. I’ll go ahead on my bicycle to make the arrangements.’ He rode off. Mathu and Gopal helped Indutai into the Victoria. Gopal said to Mathu, ‘Hurry! Don’t worry about anything. I’m here.’ Gopal and the little ones stood outside the door, their eyes on their mother. The victoria left.

Very shortly, Indutai’s head drooped onto Mathu’s shoulder. She made no movement. Mathu was very frightened. Over and over again she called out ‘Aai’, ‘Aai’. Occasionally, Indutai made some faint response. So Mathu drew solace that the worst hadn’t happened yet. Suddenly she felt a sticky warmth at her feet. It was blood! Now Mathu turned stone cold. She was afraid that death was lurking around the corner. She called out ‘Aai’, ‘Aai’ in a never-ending stream, but no words came out of her petrified mouth.

The victoria reached the hospital. Dr. Deshmukh had arranged a stretcher for Indutai. But then it was discovered that Dr. Rankin, the attending doctor, was out at a party somewhere. There seemed to be no way of saving Aai. Mathu lost hope. Dr. Deshmukh had gone to fetch Dr. Rankin. They returned within ten minutes. Dr. Rankin went immediately to Indutai. Mathu’s legs were weak. With the stress of the day, she collapsed near a pillar in the verandah and broke down. After about forty-five minutes, Dr. Rankin came out. Mathu rose but was too scared to ask her anything. Then, the doctor herself patted Mathu on the back and said, ‘Your mother will certainly live. But, I’m sorry; your sister did not survive.’ With these words, the dedicated doctor returned to her patient.

It is impossible to describe the effect of Dr. Rankin’s words on Mathu. Mathu turned to Dr. Deshmukh. ‘Doctor, today my mother was saved because of you. You are so—.’ But Dr. Deshmukh interrupted her. ‘We owe everything to Dr. Rankin. As soon as I told her how difficult the case was, the good woman immediately left the party and hastened to your mother. Well, I must leave now. My patients will be waiting. Don’t worry, everything will be all right.’

Mathu was not allowed to meet her mother as she was very weak. She went straight home. Although it was late, Gopal and the children were waiting, huddled together in fear. As soon as Mathu stepped in the house, she called out, ‘Don’t cry. Aai is fine.’ They embraced each other, their tears mixing with their smiles.

Every morning, Mathu would cook, feed the younger children, take her mother’s lunch to the hospital on her bicycle and then go to school. Gopal attended the training ‘school’ and managed the milk business. During the school recess, Mathu would come home, feed

the children and would return to school. On the way home from school, she stopped to see her mother. Every evening, Gopal went to see Indumawshi, carrying a tiffin-box, filled with hot, home-cooked food.

Indutai recovered fairly quickly, considering how ill she had been. One evening, a week later, when Mathu visited her, Indutai said, 'Mathu, I don't want to stay here any more.'

'But, Aai, how will they let you go home so soon?'

'If I stay here they will make me a Christian.'

'A Christian? What do you mean?'

'Every morning and evening, a nurse comes to my bedside and prays, "Heavenly Father, you have saved this child. Take this soul unto you. Accept her in your flock." I won't stay here. The missionary at Ghodnadi decided to convert your fattier and gave him a very hard time.'

Mathu went to see Dr. Rankin right away, who smiled and said, 'So, how do you find your mother?'

'She's well, doctor. We are very grateful to you.'

'I only did my duty. Christ in his mercy took care of her.'

'I'm sure that saved my mother. But may I make a request?'

'Yes. What is it?'

'Could you ask the nurse not to pray at her bedside?'

'What?'

'Every day, a nurse sits at Aai's bedside and prays that this woman be accepted into the Bock. Doctor, I owe you a debt of gratitude I can never repay. But my mother will not become a Christian. Please tell the nurse that.'

The prayers stopped the very next day, but after that, the nurses began neglecting Indutai. Mathu waited for barely ten days and then, with the doctor's permission, took her mother home. The children hovered around their mother, happy that she was home.

Kharemaster came from Ghodnadi, as usual, after a fortnight and was told the story in great detail. He was so distraught that he became withdrawn and did not speak. He could not share his anguish with anyone. He could not forgive himself, knowing that he would have been the cause of his wife's death. The guilt weighed heavily on him. They had produced too many children, one after the other. Although Indutai hadn't shown an aversion for the sexual aspect of married life, she hadn't shown any enthusiasm for it either. He realized that, although he was past fifty, his sexual desires were still strong. That afternoon, when the children were in school, he confided his dilemma to Indutai who didn't feel that her husband was guilty. This was just; she felt, a woman's lot. After all, her own mother had had twenty-one children.

Kharemaster began finding it difficult to travel back and forth from Ghodnadi. One of the reasons for his staying back at Ghodnadi was that it would be a natural rein to his sexual desires. But he realized that that had not worked. Mathu and Indutai looked at it from a practical point of view. Why put up with the fatigue of the journey for a salary of



just ten rupees? The milk business in Pune brought in a good income; moreover Mathu was earning. She and Indutai made Kharemaster give up his job at Ghodnadi.

At Ghodnadi, Kharemaster had many old acquaintances and friends. In Pune, he was like a fish out of water. He hardly knew anyone, and the milk business was flourishing even in his absence. He could take over the purchasing and accounts for the business, but it would be clear to everyone and to him, too, that it was just a means of keeping him busy and occupied. The children were engrossed in their own lives, and nobody had a free moment to talk to him. As he had lived at Ghodnadi, they were not used to having him around. That left just Indutai, but she was busy with the housework from morning till night. Even so, she did find time to talk to him.

So Kharemaster often sat on the large verandah of the Marawari, Tarachand, who lived across from him. He whiled away the hours watching passers-by and his children's coming and going. The children spent time with Indutai during meals. They sat with her in the kitchen and chatted with her as they ate. Naturally, she felt close to them. Even when Kharemaster was present, the children talked to Indutai. Their parting farewells and their greetings on return were addressed to their mother. 'Aai, I'm going' or 'Aai, I'm back', never 'Anna, I'm leaving'. The children surely loved and respected him, but communication between them had been lost. They acknowledged their father with a smile, as he sat by himself on the Marwari's verandah, and went their way, without exchanging a single word.

Of course Kharemaster had lived alone in Ghodnadi. But there was a difference between the solitude in Ghodnadi and the loneliness in Pune. Alone in Ghodnadi, his constant companions were his emotional ties to his family. In Pune, even in the bustling house, first he was overcome by a feeling of uselessness, then loneliness. He felt he was in everyone's way in his own home. 'I set up the rules of this game of life,' he thought, 'and now I have become but a spectator, to be acknowledged only at the whim of the players.'

The years went by. Education was of prime importance to each child; they passed their exams with flying colours; Kharemaster was proud of his children. Shanta matriculated and went on to college. Vishnu planned to join the Engineering College. Nana passed his B.sc. and joined Ferguson College as a demonstrator.

After Nana started earning, Mathu reconsidered her contribution to the family's finances. Manutai had stopped contributing to the household expenses after going to Amravati. Mathu, on the other hand, had four or five tuitions in addition to her job, and she gave every rupee she earned to her parents. But it was difficult *if* not impossible for her to buy something for herself. All the children were in school and as they grew older, their needs had increased. So every paisa coming in was needed. If Mathu wanted to buy something special for herself or travel somewhere, there was no money. After much thought, she decided to discuss this situation with her parents.

'Anna, I sometimes need some money for myself,' she began carefully. 'Is it all right if I contribute twenty rupees towards the household expenses and put forty in the bank?' Kharemaster and Indutai were slightly taken aback when they heard this. In those days, a drop of forty rupees in the family income meant a lot. Both Kharemaster and Indutai had their pride, however, and Kharemaster agreed to it. He had two younger daughters to raise, but he knew that one shouldn't be dependent on one's children. After all, both

parents decided, girls belonged to another family. Since Manutai lived away from home, her income had never been part of the family finances; now the same would be true for Mathu. To depend on the girls financially was fundamentally wrong.

A year later, Nana had started working in Ambalal Sarabhai's factory as a drawing master. He earned a good salary. Kharemaster was very proud that Nana had obtained the job entirely on his own. He felt that sons, once they were educated, could take care of themselves; daughters, on the other hand, were still dependent, needing protection.

Kharemaster could not understand what his girls were thinking of. He realized that the world around him was changing rapidly and that he was a little out of his depth. He had fought, to the best of his ability, against the custom of getting girls married before they were eight or nine. But he had not realized that once the girls were grown they would assert themselves and seek their own mates. Love is strong as well as blind, illogically ignoring caste and religion. So if the emotions were involved it was possible that social norms would be broken. What were the parents to do? Say 'don't fall in love? Was that possible? Say 'do as you wish'? Or, as in the old days, find suitable grooms and marry them off as early as possible so that the question didn't arise? But was that the end of the problem? Kharemaster grappled endlessly with such thoughts.

One morning, in school, Mathu received a message from Kharemaster, asking her to come home. Since it was only ten in the morning, Mathu was surprised and worried. Anna would never say 'leave your work and come'. So Mathu hurried home, afraid that something was wrong. At home, everything seemed normal. Aai was busy in the kitchen. Anna was standing calmly in the doorway. Mathu was puzzled.

'Anna, is everything all right?'

'Yes. We're expecting guests for lunch. Go help Aai in the kitchen.'

Mathu was surprised at Anna's words. To have guests was not unusual. Yet, Aai had never called her home from school to help. In any case, the meal was ready. Mathu arranged the red wooden *paats* that they would sit on. On the floor, around the plates and glasses, she drew a design using red and white rangoli powder. She went out to the front verandah where Anna sat chatting with a gentleman. 'Anna, Aai says everything is ready.' Kharemaster looked after his guests' needs as the two did justice to the delicious meal. Then Mathu and Aai ate in the kitchen. Later, Mathu was reading in the middle room when she heard her mother say, 'Sell my gotepatlya...' Mathu got up abruptly and went to the kitchen. 'Aai, what's the matter?'

Anna said, 'Our guest has approached us with a marriage proposal for you. He's a college professor. Manutai knows him well; in fact, she's the one who suggested this match for you.'

'But, I don't know him at all.'

'True. But he says that he accepts the proposal.'

'Anna, what do Aai's gold bangles have to do with it?'

'He's asking for a dowry of a thousand rupees.'

Mathu returned to her room and thought for a moment. She had written many articles on the status of women. She had openly protested against the system of dowry. And now, a dowry was being asked for her own marriage! Who was this man? Marriage to a

stranger? The whole thing was ridiculous! In this frame of mind, she went directly out to the verandah and said to the guest, 'Forgive me. I do not wish to get married,' and came back inside. The man was stunned. Her parents were amazed at her boldness. 'Mathu, what have you done?'

'Anna, I don't want to marry anyone until I get to know him.'

Anna tried to reason with her. But she said with certainty, 'Anna, I will not marry a man who asks for a dowry.' Finally Kharemaster went out and with folded hands asked the man to forgive them. He left. Anna came in to the house and sat by Mathu.

'Mathu, I told you once that if you wanted to get married you should let me know. You told me once but it didn't work out I felt I should do something about it and tried, but that failed too. Now, tell me what I should do. I don't have much education. I don't know too many educated people. I don't have the backing of money. In this situation, how can I look for a suitable match for you?'

Mathu replied calmly, 'Anna, I'll decide for myself. I can't possibly marry unless there's a meeting of minds. In any case, I don't want a rich man. You have taught us to be strong. I'll *try* to live that way. Anyway, I'm a life member of Hingane institution. I'll work there. Please don't worry.' Hearing the determination in Mathu's words, her father said no more.

When a seed is planted in the soil, it has no idea what kind of branches lie dormant within it. Kharemaster had inculcated in his children the best value system that he could think of, but he never dreamt how strongly his teachings would influence their future.

Nana wrote to Mathu from Ahmedabad.

*Respected Mathutai,*

*I want to go to England for my M.Sc. In fact, I have already been admitted to a college there. A gentleman named Mr. Gogate has endowed a live thousand-rupee scholarship to those wishing to study abroad and I will be able to get that. But Mr. Gogate has one condition. I le wants an equal amount, in any form, to be deposited with him as security till I complete my course and come back. On my return, the security will be given back to the depositor. Will you be able lo help me in this? Please convey my namaskar to Aai and Anna and affectionate blessings to the young ones,*

*Affectionately yours,*

*Nana*

Mathu read the letter out to Anna. In those days only the wealthy and very few lucky ones went to England and when they returned, they were lionized. Kharemaster was both amazed and proud! His Nana was going to England! His Nana had achieved all this on his own merit! At the same time he was a little hurt that Nana had not written directly to him. And was more hurt by the realization that perhaps Nana had not written to him because he was in no position to help; while his sisters, who were earning, were more likely to be able to help. 'What shall we do?' he asked Mathu. Mathu said, 'I've been

putting away money in the bank. If s in the form of cash certificates. I'll write to Manutai. Between us, well raise the deposit money.'

Between them they deposited the five thousand rupees. Nana got the scholarship. Before he left, he came to Pune to meet his parents and brothers and sisters. He had an air of confidence about him. Aai and Anna looked at him as if they were seeing him for the first time. When Nana said, 'I'll slay there for two years,' they didn't know how to respond and just said, 'Write to us regularly.' He stayed in Pune for two days. As he was leaving, they held him and with tears in their eyes asked him to take care of himself. Nana was not one to express his emotions. But his face reflected the gratitude he felt for his parents and sisters. Mathu teased him, 'Nana, you have my permission to go, but don't bring a white woman back with you.' Nana smiled and left.

Kharemaster was a silent spectator to the whole episode. At one time, inspired by Gandhiji's freedom movement, Nana had wanted to quit his college, but Kharemaster had stopped him. He had told him that such a drastic slip was not for the likes of them. Today Nana was in this position because he had listened to his father. Those young men who had quit their college education to join the fight for freedom were nowhere today. Nana would have been in the same boat.

Yet Kharemaster wondered if it had been right to give Nana that advice. What had Nana thought of him? Perhaps he had thought, 'My father talked big about the freedom movement, but when it came to his own son's responding to Gandhi's call he advised retreat?' Had Nana lost respect for him because of this double standard?

Today, his Nana was going far away to England. But, over the past couple of years, although he had been in the country, he had grown distant from them. He wrote infrequently and his visits were even more infrequent. Had he lost his ties with his father? Or, was it a case of out of sight, out of mind? The same thing had happened to Manutai.

Kharemaster concluded that birds were luckier than men. Birds forget their young ones as soon as the fledglings grow wings and leave the nest; when our children leave, we, on the other hand, are left with intense memories that continue to haunt us.

Yd, even when children seem to be estranged from their parents, their lives continue to be intertwined with their parents' lives.

When Nana was working as a demonstrator in Pune, he had fallen in love with a girl in his college and had asked Mathu to approach the girl's parents. With Aai and Anna's permission, Mathu approached the girl's mother, who said sweetly, "Yes, we are seeking a proper match for Avantika. But we want a good prospect, a rich person, from a reputable family.' At that time, all of them, Indu-tai, Kharemaster, Nana and Mathu had felt a sense of rejection. At that instant, Nana decided that come what may, he would become rich one day.

As soon as it was learnt that Nana had gone abroad for further studies, the marriage prospects changed dramatically. They were being approached by very prominent families. Now, as the groom's father, Kharemaster held the reins. He told some, "Yes, when our son returns from England, we want a suitable match.' To others he said, "We're not thinking of his marriage yet. He'll decide when he comes.' He answered as the mood struck him. But he and his son were to learn the hard way that to survive in marriage, just as in other aspects of life, one must be wise in the ways of the world.

While Nana was still in England, he was offered a very well-paying job by the well-known company, Imperial Chemicals Industries, at their office in Calcutta. When he returned from England, he was inundated with marriage proposals. The father of a prospective bride wrote from Yavatmal, in Varhad, requesting him to come and see the girl at least. When Nana responded that he didn't have time to come to Yavatmal, the hopeful father brought his daughter to Bombay. Nana expected to get married only after he got to know the girl, but since that was not customary, he told her father that at the very least he wanted to talk to the girl. The father made no objection. Nana and the girl went to the Chowpatty sea beach for half an hour. Nana thought the girl was all right, but because she had had only four years of schooling he was not interested in marrying her. The girl's father raised an unexpected obstacle. 'You went out with her,' he said, 'if you don't marry her she will be ruined.' Nana was surprised. 'Just because we went out once?' The father answered emphatically "Yes, now you two must get married.' Nana didn't know how to get out of this situation, but he realized it was not possible to get to know any other young lady before marriage so he agreed to this match. The wedding date was fixed. The bride's father benefited in two ways. He got a well-placed son-in-law by using their half-hour interview as an excuse, and as both Nana and his father were modern in their attitudes, he didn't have to pay any dowry.

Nana was even a step more progressive than his father. He said, 'If I marry at all, it will be a simple registered wedding.' The girl's father had to concede this and to give up his wishes for the traditional, elaborate ceremony associated with a Hindu marriage. The bride and groom signed the registry in the presence of two witnesses. They were thus married, without any fanfare, without priests, rituals, relatives or friends. Even Indutai and Kharemaster were not present. They had just learnt of a new way of getting married. This new world that thought of marriage as a mere contract perplexed them.

Traditionally, one is not supposed to marry ahead of an older sister or brother. Nana broke that custom too. If it had been any other family, people would have assumed that the older sisters had remained unmarried because there was something wrong with them. But Kharemaster's household was viewed as being unusual. In spite of that, the fact that these middle-aged sisters were as yet unmarried did raise eyebrows.

Kharemaster grew increasingly uneasy on this score. He had started educating his daughters thirty years ago and now he was seeing some unexpected results. The opposition to the education of girls was not as strong as before. Even if they were very keen on continuing with their education, good looking girls would begin receiving offers of marriage as soon as they reached the Matric class. Then the parents too would be tempted to see their daughters settled and that would be the end of their education. Graduate studies, such as the study of medicine took many years. In general, only girls of average looks, who had not received proposals of marriage, continued to study in such fields. Then it was age that came in the way of their getting married.

Thirty-five years earlier, Kharemaster had wanted to marry a grown up girl. But he had found that because of the practice of child marriage such older girls were inevitably child-widows. So he had married Indu, who was ten or twelve years younger than him. Now the tide had turned. Women who had spent many years in the pursuit of higher education were not able to find a suitable match nearer to their own age. As a result, many of them made compromises they wouldn't otherwise have made. Some accepted

widowers with several children. Many such men were well off, so they used middle-men to select brides. These middlemen indulged in various corrupt practices: they offered bribes to the girl and her parents; at times they even threatened them into submission. Sometimes innocent women fell prey to unscrupulous men. Then their lives were ruined; some, to save their honour, were even driven to suicide.

Kharemaster heard these tales of woe every day. He was very worried for the sake of his grown up daughters. Mathutai was aware of the lives of her contemporaries. The stories of their experiences, their heartaches, their disappointments, would have filled many volumes. Her own experience had added another chapter to this. Although she wanted to get married, she was not willing to make ridiculous compromises on that account. She was, of course, well-known in Pune. Well-wishers often suggested prospective grooms for her. They tried to entice her father with the promise of jewellery. Some approached her directly for themselves; others wrote to her father. All these men were prominent, wealthy, highly educated, but pensioners or widowers with grown children—many of them over fifty. She did meet some young men occasionally, but didn't care for any of them. She often heard stories of middle aged women marrying completely unsuitable men. A teacher in the Karachi school in her early thirties had married a well-known man in his late fifties. A doctor from Bombay had married an aged sardar in Indore. The principal of a girls' school in Amravati, who was in her thirties, had married a fifty-five-year-old rich lawyer, a widower.

Before the summer holidays began, they received a letter from Manutai. She wrote that she was engaged to an extremely wealthy young man and was in the process of leaving her job in Amravati to go to England to get a diploma in social work before the marriage. Indutai and Kharemaster were overjoyed. Soon after they received the letter, Manutai brought her fiancé to meet them. 'Anna, this is the man I wrote about. This is Shreedhar Pandit.' Indutai and Kharemaster were amazed to see their future son-in-law. He was handsome, fair complexioned, quiet and dignified. His appearance and behaviour suggested education and culture. Kharemaster wondered, 'How will this rich man feel seeing our modest home and simple way of life? Will he think he has made a mistake in selecting Manutai?' But the man's smiling appearance gave him hope. Shreedhar Pandit himself asked with ease, 'Aai, how about a cup of tea?' Indutai went to make tea. Manutai told her father about her future plans. 'Anna, I'm going to England for a year. I'll get my diploma in a year. We'll get married when I come back. Shreedhar will stay here in Pune till I return.' Anna could not help noticing that, quite contrary to tradition, she called her fiancé by his first name. He was quite amazed!

Soon after that, Manutai went abroad. Shreedhar Pandit had taken care of all the financial arrangements. Kharemaster thought this was a fairy tale. Mathu had refused to marry because of the demand for a dowry. Now, this gentleman had given two or three thousand rupees to his wife-to-be! And he was ready to wait a year to get married! Could this really be true?

This fairy tale took an unexpected turn, and an element of mystery was added to it. One day, Mathu went to the offices of a well-known newspaper of the time. There she saw Shreedhar Pandit working in the press. She was very surprised and left immediately. Luckily, he had not noticed her. She puzzled over this on the way home. Why was a wealthy man working side by side with the compositors? When she shared this news with

Anna, he was equally confused. Had this man been cheating Manutai? But if he really was a compositor, how could he afford to give Manutai three thousand rupees?

One day Pandit said, 'I'm considering renting a place on Gymkhana and living right here in Pune.'

Kharemaster said, Then do come here for your meals.'

That's very kind of you, but my old cook will be coming with me.'

Kharemaster pondered over this. Who was this man who could afford to rent a house and keep a cook? But he didn't have the nerve to ask him. A month later, a letter arrived from Manutai.

*Dear Mathu,*

*Affectionate blessings.*

*I received Shreedhar's letter yesterday. He is now very knowledgeable about running a printing press. He is considering starting his own printing press as he wants to publish good books. You may be surprised at his love of books—his circle of friends, especially Trivikram Kulkarni, his closest friend, fostered Shreedhar's love of reading. Shreedhar is going to set up house in Pune, so Trivikram will be a frequent visitor. You will get to know him well. Trivikram is a little eccentric, but his heart and his head are in the right place.*

*I've been here three months now. I've become very familiar with London. The English are very reticent. You can roam around all day, yet not one person will speak to you. So when I meet an Indian, we chat like we're old friends. Recently, I went to the British Museum. My sari makes it obvious that I'm Indian. And because of that, I was approached by an Indian gentleman. Would you believe, he started speaking in Marathi? His name is Madhukar Tatke. He's doing his Ph.D. in Chemistry at Cambridge. Both of us were happy to speak Marathi. The funny thing is that about a month later, when I went to the Tate Gallery, I met Tatke and a friend of his. It seems that Tatke and his friend are very interested in art. While Tatke was explaining the intricacies of line and colour to his friend, he saw me. The three of us then roamed the gallery together, discussing the paintings. Later, he insisted on treating us to tea at a Lyons coffee shop. Tatke seems to be an educated, cultured, and forthright gentleman.*

*Mathu, the reason I'm going on and on about Tatke is that I think he'll be perfect for you. I casually told him a little about you. He said, 'Yes, I've read some of her articles/ The topic ended there. After a couple of meetings, I asked him if he would consider a marriage alliance with you. He grew a little serious, smiled, and said, 'Your sister must be like you. I must think about your suggestion. But how is this possible till we meet each other?' When I return, we'll see how the two of you can meet. I'll be coming back to India in seven months. Please convey my namaskar to Aai and Anna. Tell them I'm well. Blessings and love to the rest*

*Affectionately,*

*Manutai*

*Dear Manutai,*

*Your letter solved a mystery that had baffled all of us.*

*Shreedharbhau comes here on Sundays as we're all free on that day. We chat about all sorts of things. One day he asked me, 'What have you written recently?' I replied, 'I am studying the change in the position of women through the ages as written in the Smritis.' He laughed and said, 'You are too young to read the Vedas. Instead, why don't you write about real life experiences, about the present conditions of society!' Although I didn't make any response, I remembered the women at Hingane, their lives, their experiences, their stories. The next time he came, he asked again about my writing. 'I'll write,' I said. 'But women aren't supposed to say what they feel. If I write, people will tear me to pieces.' Shreedharbhau thought about this and said, 'Just write. Then we'll see.'*

*One day, almost gripped by a frenzy, I wrote. I showed it to Shreedharbhau when he next visited. He liked it very much. 'I'll publish this.'*

*Immediately I got scared and protested. 'No, no Shreedharbhau, please don't do that! I'll lose my job. The parents of my students will be angry with me.'*

*'Well then, use a pen name.'*

*'But the publisher won't keep my identity a secret.'*

*'Then I'll publish it myself. Is that all right?'*

*'But my name must remain secret.'*

*'Don't worry. I guarantee that.'*

*I think the book will be published by the end of this month. Shreedharbhau will send you a copy, of course. Make sure you don't divulge my name either!*

*I met Trivikram Kulkarni, the young man you mentioned in your letter. He's truly brilliant, but has an acid tongue. Shreedharbhau calls him Vikram, not Trivikram. When I first heard the truncated name 'Vikram', I laughed. He said, 'Shreedhar is very jealous. So he has cut out two thirds of me.'*

*Manutai, Shreedharbhau always tells us when he gets a letter from you. He talks and talks about you, and about what you've written. It's time for school now, so I'll stop. Let me know what you think of the book.*

*Affectionately yours,*

*Mathu*

Shreedhar Pandit began coming more frequently to the house to discuss Mathu's book. He and Mathu would talk for hours. Mathu also visited Shreedhar Pandit's house, where Trivikram was a frequent visitor. Trivikram's conversation was very interesting, full of new ideas that reflected his wide reading. Mathu felt herself getting drawn to him; as a result she began visiting Shreedharbhau more frequently. Sometimes she returned home after dark. But Mathu never shared the secret of her attraction for Trivikram with her parents. Kharemaster and Indutai were uneasy. Of course Shreedharbhau was Mathu's



future brother-in-law. But it was not right that she spent so much time with him. And shouldn't Shreedharbhau himself sense this? Later, they began to worry. Would Shreedharbhau forget Manutai? Were he and Mathu getting involved with each other? They had no idea of Mathu's interest in Trivikram.

Shreedhar Pandit was wealthy. He was generous, hospitable and had a real zest for life. As a result his home was always full of friends from Pune and guests from his native Varjaad. Between his love of literature and his hospitable nature, his home was a haven for the literary community of Pune. This milieu proved beneficial when Mathu's book was published. This book was reviewed widely, receiving acclaim as well as stern criticism. The book dealt frankly with the many problems facing women. The unknown writer was deluged with criticism, from the newspapers and through meetings, discussions and seminars. Her fans rolled up their sleeves and openly sided with her. Between these, the book received a great deal of publicity and sold well. The publisher who had conceived the idea of keeping this writer's identity hidden also received his share of attention.

Manutai's parents were naturally very proud of then- future son-in-law. Shreedhar Pandit wrote to Manutai in great detail to share this happiness with her. His letters praised Mathu's writing, and the boldness she had shown in writing such a book. He enclosed newspaper clippings showing the outpouring of both approbation and criticism. He described vividly how Mathu was overawed by this furore, how she had to be constantly reassured that her name would be kept secret, and what was being done to keep it so. And, he added a warning to Manu to be careful and not to divulge the secret.

During this period, Dr. Deshmukh showed up at their home, unexpectedly. He had not dropped by for several months. They welcomed him. Mathu remarked, 'Dr. Deshmukh, had you forgotten us? Where had you disappeared to?'

Dr. Deshmukh replied, 'I have been in England for the past six months. I went there for a special course.'

'Wonderful! Did you meet Manutai there?'

'Often! Although London is huge, Indians there create their own world.'

'And how is Manutai?'

'She's going to bring you an England-returned son-in-law.'

'What are you telling us?'

'My guess is that Manutai is going to marry Dr. Tatke. I ran into her a couple of times, and each time Dr. Tatke was with her. Some other Indian students also said so.'

All the family members were shaken to the core and fell silent. They had grown fond of Shreedharbhau. Each one wrestled privately with himself, not daring to voice his concerns. Would Manutai jilt Shreedharbhau? Her first affair had broken up, would the second one too? And what about the three thousand rupees Shreedharbhau had spent? Didn't this new generation have any respect for marriage? Wasn't their word important to them? But maybe Dr. Deshmukh was assuming too much. Or, was Mathu involved with Shreedharbhau? Had Shreedharbhau told Manutai that himself? Kharemaster and Indutai were completely out of their depths at this turn of events.

Mathu was furious with Dr. Deshmukh for his tale-telling. She had not received a letter from Manutai for many days. She wrote to Manutai telling her about Dr. Deshmukh's irresponsible comments and asking her to give him a real dressing down; Manutai did not respond to this letter and now Mathu herself was worried.

Shreedharbhai showed up one day, his face glowing with happiness. 'I've just received a telegram from Manu. She's arriving in Bombay in two days. I'm leaving for Bombay today to receive her.' Everyone was very relieved when they heard this. They were convinced that Dr. Deshmukh had been completely wrong.

Shreedhar Pandit was in seventh heaven. Manutai had successfully completed her diploma and was returning as scheduled. His very first publishing venture had brought him success and prestige. They would get married as soon as possible. But, soon after her arrival, Manutai dashed all his hopes.

Manutai did not once smile at him; she avoided his gaze and made only cursory "yes" and "no" responses to his questions and comments. She set her bags down in the hotel room, and sat very still. Then she rose, went to the door of the balcony and stood there, staring outside. Shreedhar could not imagine what had happened. He had a strong sense of foreboding. Manu eventually turned around and addressed him, 'Shreedhar.'

'Yes, Manu?'

She looked at him, trying to decide how to break it to him. Then she came out and said it. 'I'm going to marry someone else.'

This one sentence destroyed all his self-esteem and composure. He looked at Manu, speechless with shock. Was this true or was he dreaming? Manu turned again towards the balcony door. Shreedhar roused himself. After some thought, he rose. Manu heard him, turned around and asked, "Where are you going?"

'Down to the registration desk. I'll get another room. It's not right that we share a room, now.'

He turned to go. Manutai was taken aback. This was the first time she had experienced the consequences of her behaviour in her relationship with Shreedhar.

'Shreedhar, don't you want to ask why I did this?'

"You didn't consult me before doing it. What's the use of my asking you now?"

When he heard Manutai's next sentence, however, he halted.

The two of you left no choice for me. What was I to do when—.'

He was caught completely off guard. 'What? Two of us? Who?'

'When you and Mathu ...'

Shreedhar came back, went to her and said, "What are you saying Manu?"

'Only what I've been hearing for the past seven or eight months from others. I'm telling you just what I read in your letters.' For the first time she looked directly at him. Think of how the two of you have behaved these past seven or eight months. You used to go to look in on Aai and Anna. Then you gave Mathutai the idea of writing a book. And what sort of book? One that exposed our family to shame. Mathu is not one to write like this but she gave in to you. You used the book to talk to Mathu for hours on end, both at

your house and ours. You didn't stop to consider what Aai and Anna thought of this or what others felt.'

This attack, beyond the realms of his imagination, left Shreedhar speechless. M she had left unsaid was, 'You duped me and so I did this.'

'As if this was not enough, you decided to keep her identity a secret as a publicity stunt. Then you took on the duty of protecting Mathu from public outrage and made her dependent on you! I could see what was in store for me on my return. So I had no choice. Instead, if you had been honest with me—.'

Manu was choked with emotion. Her eyes brimmed with tears. She sat on the bed, motionless, not looking up at him. Shreedhar watched her in disbelief. That his very first success should be the cause of his misfortune was too much to bear.

Manu composed herself after a while. 'I've been offered a job at Lahore. I've decided to work for seven or eight months, repay you and then get married. I told Dr. Tatke so before I came.'

When he heard this, Shreedhar knew what he had to do. He rose. 'Fine, I'll leave now. I'll be right here in another room, till you go to Pune. Let me know if you need anything.'

'Shreedhar, is that all you have to say?'

"What else remains to be said? Oh, yes, there is one thing I forgot to mention. Mathutai is getting married to Trivikram soon.'

Manu jumped up as if struck by lightning. "What did you say?'

Shreedhar responded calmly, 'Why don't you ask them yourself when you go to Pune. Then you'll know for sure.' With this Shreedhar left. Manutai was devastated when she heard this.

Only Manutai knows how she lived with herself after this. When she had composed herself, she decided to marry Shreedhar Pandit and she let Dr. Tatke know her decision. Manutai and Shreedhar went to the registry office and gave notice of their wedding, but the charm was lost.

Kharemaster and Indutai decided to give a banquet in honour of their son-in-law. A large hall was booked for the occasion; Shreedharbhai provided the guest list. He personally saw to the needs of every guest, and introduced Manutai to all his friends as his better half.

Kharemaster watched with pride, but from the sidelines. He could not participate in the jokes and the exchanges of these prominent people. He sensed that he was not quite at par with them, and this knowledge hurt him. Many of the guests asked to be introduced to Manutai's parents; although Shreedharbhai implored them, they did not join the gathering. They felt that they just did not belong.

Kharemaster and Indutai felt that they and their children lived in separate worlds. They did not attend any of their weddings after this. There was no point in watching from the sidelines. And what if the children felt embarrassed about introducing them? So they stayed home, using their milk business as an excuse.

Mathu, who still lived in Pune, was, as usual, a tower of strength. Kharemaster took great comfort from her presence and was very proud of her success. He had a feeling of

great contentment that all his children were doing very well. Each one had carved his or her own path. He knew that he would not have been able to guide them. Nana had made a name for himself in Calcutta. Vishnu had become an engineer and was well settled in Nagpur. Shanta was in the Medical College. Nana had undertaken the responsibility of Rohini's education. Of course Kharemaster was very proud of them all, but he only heard about their successes from a distance; that Mathu's was experienced at close quarters added a measure of happiness.

Shortly after that, Mathu was transferred to Hingane and went to live there. Kharemaster felt the first twinge of old age. He, Indutai and the youngest, Shalini, were the only ones left in Pune. He felt that his family was like a tree, bare after its leaves had fallen. Mathu visited them faithfully every weekend. But the feeling that she was lonely preyed on him.

Mathu also experienced this loneliness. She used to meet Trivikram Kulkarni regularly at Shreedharbhai's, but now that Shreedharbhai had settled in Bombay, these meetings had ceased. Trivikram's discriminating tastes and his intelligence had served to stimulate her intellect. They discussed everything—literature, politics, social issues. And Trivikram was pleasantly surprised to find that their tastes in literature were so similar. Her book had shown him the range and depth of her intellect. Mathu and Trivikram had much in common with each other—their mutual attraction, their intuitive understanding of each other, their common likes and dislikes and their affection for Manutai-Shreedharbhai.

It is said that all's fair in love and war. That's because in both one has to face many unexpected, illogical and strange situations. Mathu found this out the hard way. One day Trivikram said, 'I think we should decide to stop meeting.'

Mathu was stunned. 'We should? But, why?'

'Youth is a dangerous time. If we meet like this so often, this will turn to love.'

Mathu asked, 'So what's wrong with that?'

Trivikram said with great earnestness, 'Nothing from my point of view, perhaps everything from yours.'

'Only from mine?'

'Yes. Because I'm already married.'

Mathu felt as if the ground slipped from under her feet. She tried to blame him for not telling her earlier. She tried to tell herself that he had tricked her. But her heart told her that none of this was true. She didn't remember his having pursued her. She realized that in her eagerness to meet him, she herself had made repeated trips to Bombay. She talked to Shreedharbhai who said, 'Yes, he is married. But he has been wandering around for many years like a homeless soul. And for several years, his wife has been living with her parents, I'm not sure where.' Mathu was terribly upset for a week. Then she approached Trivikram and said, 'I love you. Are you ready to divorce your wife and marry me?'

Trivikram replied, 'I'm ready. But divorce is only possible if my wife agrees. I know it will eventually come to that. But I'm not willing to take that step myself.'

Mathu returned to Pune with a heavy heart. She decided to treat this as a closed chapter. But soon she discovered that the heart has a mind of its own. Just then, she received a letter from Shreedharbhai. Trivikram is going to England on a government

scholarship.’ When she read this, she knew what to do. She went to Bombay without telling a soul, met Trivikram and said, ‘Let’s get married before you leave.’

‘I’m ready. But give it some thought. I’m going for a year. The clouds of war are gathering over Europe. If war does break out, and I’m stuck there—.’

Mathu stopped him. ‘Come what may. We’ll get married now.’

With the help of his friends, Trivikram made preparations for the wedding in just two days. As the *mangalashtaka* solemnizing the wedding was being recited, tears rolled down Mathu’s cheeks. She was haunted by the knowledge that she had treated her parents so badly. *I didn’t let Aai and Anna know. How could I have treated them like this? But what if they had refused permission for the wedding?*

### *five*

The shadows lengthened as evening fell. Kharemaster wandered aimlessly through the streets of Pune, just as he had been doing for the past two days.

Mathu’s wedding had shocked him no end. He and Indutai would look wordlessly at each other; there was nothing left to say. Mathu was their beloved child, so dependable, so caring. Why had she done this? He remembered, out of the distant past, Deshpandemaster’s words. ‘One shouldn’t get too attached to one’s daughters. They win, after all, belong to other families.’ But Mathu had gone a step beyond that. It was not just that she now belonged to another; she had treated them as if they were strangers, leaving them on their own, making them feel lonely. Of course, the two youngest daughters, Rohini and Shalini, were still at home. Kharemaster knew he had to do his duty by them, but he knew he must pay heed to Deshpandemaster’s words too. He had to learn to keep an emotional distance.

Kharemaster had become withdrawn, wrapped up in his own thoughts. Often he would feel that his head was spinning, his very brain seemed to be on fire. From time to time he’d become aware of the twinge in his scalp. He’d massage his head, in an effort to stop the throbbing. For hours on end, he would sit in Tarachand’s front verandah, staring at his own home. Now the constant bustle of the children was gone; only the customers for milk came by.

He spent hours thinking of his eight children. He felt he had done his best for them; all of them were well educated, well settled. Yet, only loneliness had come his way. And not just because of Mathu. He was secretly afraid that his children had grown distant and that they felt embarrassed about him because he was not very educated. His younger son Vishnu had made a name for himself as an engineer. When Vishnu was in the first year of the engineering college, Kharemaster had once casually asked him, ‘Are you working as hard as you should?’ ‘Yes,’ Vishnu replied. Kharemaster had raised his voice a little, ‘What did you do today? Tell me.’ Vishnu had responded in an irritated tone, ‘I’ll tell you if you want. But will you know what a vector is?’ Kharemaster had felt like a fool.

Kharemaster’s thoughts turned inward again: Now whenever Vishnu visits Pune, his business colleagues come to meet him. I seek the shelter of Tarachand’s verandah so that Vishnu is not embarrassed by our simple home and his simpleton father. The same thing

used to happen when Manutai and Mathu came. Their visitors would drop in once and then never come again. If I had been educated, like my children, they would not have become so distant. But do children become estranged so easily? Education cannot be the only factor. Can the bonds of love, forged since childhood, weaken so easily? It is true that the children are far away, busy with their own lives and we don't see them often. I know that their tastes, their opinions have changed. But I also know that they care for us. Each time Vishnu gets a new contract he comes here from Nagpur to ask for our blessings. Nana is at Calcutta, a thousand miles away, but he sends sweetmeats, expensive saris and other gifts for the family with anyone coming this way. We are bound together with the strongest of ties—the bonds of love.

In spite of this, however, he did get disillusioned when he saw that some of his own children spurned his long-cherished values that he had tried to inculcate in them. Recently, Vishnu had successfully bid on a huge contract of fifty-lakh rupees. As usual, he came to Pune to ask for Aai and Anna's blessings. He remarked casually, 'I had to bribe the authorities fifty thousand rupees to get their signatures on the fifty-lakh contract. That's how one has to behave in this corrupt world.' He touched Aai's and Anna's feet and went back on the evening train, happy at his success. But Kharemaster couldn't sleep a wink that night. What had he taught these children? What kind of an example had he set?

Once Nana sent twenty-five gold guinea coins with a friend. Kharemaster had never seen a guinea coin before that. Tarachand, the Marwari educated him. 'Guineas are very useful to hide black money and to keep it safe.' Kharemaster looked at the coins. Shining gold coins, but called "black!" He smiled, but there was a tinge of bitterness. He had always praised Nana's sterling success, but now he recognized its true colours. Was nothing unsullied? Is all that glitters finally black? How could he say that his children lived by the rules he had taught? And Mathu, his dearest child, had without any compunction married a man whose first wife was still alive! The more Kharemaster thought about his children's behaviour, the more despondent he became. During this period, Deshpandemaster came to Pune, Kharemaster shared his feelings of disappointment and regret with Deshpandemaster, who responded, 'Anna, the children have grown up. Let them make their own mistakes. Let them decide their actions and be responsible; for their own behaviour. You yourself must have made some compromises in your life. Think of those!' Kharemaster was even more taken aback by Deshpandemaster's next words. 'Even parents are not necessarily selfless and straightforward about their children. What did King Yayati from the *Mahabharata* epic do? He exchanged his old age for his son's youth. Why? Just for the pleasures of the flesh. Shantanu fell in love with Ganga, making his own son Bhishma a life-long lonely celibate.'

Kharemaster took a long hard look at himself. He had prided himself on living for his family; he was the head of this large household, and yet... Nana was taking care of Rohini's expenses. Vishnu had undertaken the responsibility of Shalini's future medical college expenses. So in a sense, he was benefiting from his children's earnings and from what he considered, their questionable behaviour. How then, could he blame them? In all honesty, he had not meant to have such a large family. And now that he could not take care of the younger children, he had passed the burden onto the older children. And on top of it he was complaining about their behaviour! Kharemaster didn't know whether he

should laugh or cry. His thoughts were his constant companions; they were wrapped around him like a cocoon, and had completely isolated him. To add to that, memories of some of his past behaviour would gnaw at him, and he would despise himself. He would berate himself, and become even more dejected.

Indutai didn't have a clue about any of this. Her entire world was centred around her family, the house, and the milk business. She drew her happiness from her family and from her work. She was not bothered by any such questions. The only thing she worried about was Kharemaster's health. He seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. He was always lost in thought, rubbing his head as he walked through the house. Often, finding nothing to do, he'd go off by himself, wandering aimlessly through the town.

One day, Kharemaster was walking along Tilak Road. There, at the end of an alley, was a tiny flower shop. An old man sat on a bench, near the flower shop. Resting his chin on his walking stick, he stared into the distance. His wrinkled face was sad and empty. Kharemaster recognized him as Professor Phadke. Once, when Mathu had taken her father to an eye doctor, Professor Phadke happened to be in the doctor's waiting room. At that time Mathu had introduced her father to Professor Phadke.

Professor Phadke looked at Kharemaster but didn't recognize him, although the latter did namaskar and greeted him by name. Then, almost as if he suddenly remembered, he said, 'You're Mathutai Khare's father, aren't you?'

At first Kharemaster was happy, and nodded, but then he realized that with that question his identity as an individual had been wiped out. Just to make conversation, he said, 'Are you here all by yourself?'

Professor Phadke replied, 'I'm so lonely at home all day, I feel I'm going crazy. So I come here in the evening. Occasionally, I run into someone I know. They chat for a while and go on their way. But—,' saying this he stopped. He turned to look at the road and said to himself, 'It's strange—.'

Kharemaster looked at him, eager to know more. Professor Phadke turned to him and said. Tell me, how is it that everyone I meet says exactly the same thing? Each one says with great sincerity, "I want to come to your house and have a long chat with you. For an hour or two at least." In the beginning, I was hopeful, very hopeful. Now experience has taught me that no one actually comes. So I sit here and look at the world as it goes by. At least this way I have some company. It helps pass the time, that's for sure.'

Kharemaster was very surprised that Phadkesaheb had bared his soul to a comparative stranger. He wanted to stay awhile and chat, to say something that would please the professor. Probably Professor Phadke also wished the same but neither was able to come out and say it. Finally Kharemaster went his way without saying a word.

'So loneliness doesn't plague just the poor and the uneducated,' he thought. 'Even a learned and famous man like Phadke gets caught in its web. Are even the rich and powerful not immune?'

Kharemaster avoided that area for the next week or so. When he did go there again, he found Professor Phadke sitting, as before, alone. As soon as he saw Kharemaster he said, 'I thought you'd come this way again. I was hoping to meet you.'

‘I thought of doing that a few times.’

‘And?’

Kharemaster hesitated, not knowing if he should tell the truth.

‘And what happened?’

‘Well, I’m a simple drawing master. I shouldn’t expect to be with someone like yourself.’

Professor Phadke looked at Kharemaster with understanding and, gently, in a soft tone he said, ‘Kharemaster, both you and I have to appear for the same final exam. It does not distinguish between the educated and the uneducated, the poor and the rich. The only thing that matters is how you have lived your life.’

After this, the two continued to meet occasionally. Their favourite meeting place was the garden of a college on Tilak Road. Here, the two would talk, for hours on end, in tune with each other, sharing the same worries and concerns. Phadke had been an outstanding teacher in his time. So he did not lecture; instead he skilfully asked thought-provoking questions, drawing out the listener, and making him think for himself. Once, he said, ‘Kharemaster, one thinks that one is dejected because of loneliness. Actually that is not so.’

Kharemaster asked, ‘Not loneliness? Then what is it?’

Think about it! Try to remember!’

Kharemaster thought I don’t have to think about it I know it by heart. I wake up in the morning and wander around the house because there’s nothing to do. The hubbub of life goes on without anyone taking notice of me. Customers come for milk but they go past me and talk to Gopal, and greet Indu. Around nine-thirty, all my attention is directed to the arrival of the postman. I make many trips out to the street and back inside. Will there be a letter today? At least one? The children are spread all over, from Calcutta to Nagpur to Bombay. Surely it will occur at least to one to write. The postman comes near the house, raising my hopes, but goes past me, unaware of the turmoil he causes. Sometimes even waiting for the postman is unbearable. So I leave home before the postman is due, and return only when I’m sure he’s come and gone. The first thing I ask Indu is, ‘Any letters?’ The only difference between her response and the postman’s is that she says, ‘No.’ The house is right on the street and the front door is often wide open. Outside there is an unending stream of people. In the evening, it seems as if the whole town goes past this very door—to the theatre, to the cinema, to meetings and lectures, or maybe just for some fresh air. But they go by as if we don’t exist; not even one person looks at the open door out of curiosity. Manutai and Mathu used to have a host of visitors. I became acquainted with at least some of them. But not one of them thinks of going just a little out of the way to ask after us.

This, then is loneliness. Loneliness that’s a constant companion. Day and night No, not at night. Now, as he grew older, Kharemaster didn’t sleep as soundly as he used to. He would wake up in the middle of the night, his mind alert, and would remain awake for hours on end, counting each minute as it slowly ticked by. He didn’t believe in meditation, prayer or mantras, so he could not use these to fall asleep. Then he would be hounded by thoughts. Thoughts that could not be controlled. Gripped by some unknown



fear. Just as a man fast asleep is startled out of it by a rat running over his feet and hears its nibbling and gnawing from all directions and is afraid—so he would be afraid. Frightened and struggling to free himself from some unseen danger. But this is not loneliness. No, thankfully, night provides cover for loneliness. During the day, however, one's loneliness is exposed.

Phadke continued, 'Kharemaster, this is not loneliness. It is the realization that one is being constantly rejected. The world around is alive, throbbing, laughing, breathless as it plays its game all day long; engrossed only *in* itself. We now realize that we have been forbidden to play that game and we're hi the sidelines. That feeling of neglect makes you lonely, pricks at you. But it is not the fault of the world. You no longer have the strength and enthusiasm to play, so it's going to set you aside. To be ignored like this constantly in a bustling, thriving world is to watch one's death with one's own eyes.'

Kharemaster was mesmerized by Phadke's wisdom and words. He walked home with new food for thought I'm faced with two bad choices; during the day, loneliness that feels like death and this unspoken fear at night. Is that the fear of death? Surely, we are all afraid of death. Then how is Indu so strong? But when does she have the time to be afraid? She is so busy working all day that she doesn't have a spare moment to be afraid. At night, as soon as her head hits the pillow, she's asleep. Gopal is engrossed in establishing himself. Shalini is dreaming about her medical college in Bombay next year. They don't have the time for such foolishness. I am the one who is dying, bit by bit. At one time I told the children that they must be optimistic, they must fight the good fight, be successful, and they must win. But at that time I did not know that everything ends in this way.' He wondered if his age made him think this way. But how do you escape from the throes of such thoughts?

He had great faith in Phadke's wisdom. But lately Phadke had not shown up in the garden. One day Kharemaster learned that Phadke was not well. He wondered whether he should go and see him. But would Phadke appreciate such familiarity? What if other important people happened to be visiting Phadke at the same time? Finally he summoned enough courage and decided that if there were other visitors, he would quietly slip away. He asked for directions to Phadke's house and went there.

Phadke was alone at home, lying down. He looked happy to see Kharemaster. He held Kharemaster's hand for the first time and asked him to sit by him. Kharemaster looked around; no one else was there. He asked, 'How are you?' Phadke responded, 'Everything is fine. A woman does the cooking, a man does the housework and the doctor stops by to check up on me.' Phadke stopped. His words and the ensuing silence spoke volumes. Phadke had closed his eyes. He said, 'My wife passed away a long time ago. My children are in America. As soon as they know I'm not well, they send money and write asking me to take care of myself.' He opened his eyes as he spoke, looked at Kharemaster and said, 'They're young. How can they know if s the warmth of their presence I need, not the cold reassurance of money?'

These sad words made Kharemaster quite uncomfortable. Just to change the topic, he inquired about Phadke's health. Phadke was suffering from an as yet undiagnosed low-grade fever and the investigation was going on. Phadke's words failed to mask the anxiety in his expression. Although he addressed Kharemaster, it seemed that he was trying to reassure himself. 'Look here, at this age, we must welcome any illness that

comes our way. Actually, as soon as the world starts ignoring you, you must realize that you are no longer useful. So it is time to leave not just the game, but the playground itself. Even the Adivasis and other tribal people have this wisdom. Do you know what the Eskimos at the North Pole do? When an older person ceases to be useful, after he is asleep, a lamp is left at his bedside. When that person sees the lamp, he knows that he must leave the igloo and go out into the arms of blizzards and snowstorms. And, in our culture, it is traditional for the householder to take the final *sanyas*, the learned sages take the final *samadhi*. Now I am trying to inch towards that state of fearlessness. The world around me and my children are pushing me away, right? Fine! I'll pack up my bags and take my leave of them!'

Kharemaster was shaken to the core as he listened to Phadke's words. Shaken and terrified. He felt his emotional distance from his own little world growing day by day. And there seemed to be no escape from his heartaches. But suicide as a way out? He could not bear the thought of that. Yet he could see no other solution.

How did Phadke have the strength to think like this? How could he plan this course of action, Kharemaster wondered. He decided that it must be the result of Phadke's hard earned knowledge. That he, Kharemaster, had missed this learning and knowledge was truly his greatest tragedy.

One day he received a message from Phadke, asking him to come. When he went to his house he saw that it was full. His son, daughter, daughter-in-law, son-in-law and grandchildren were all there, yet a strange stillness had fallen over the house. As silent as if a hunter had seen its quarry and was stealthily approaching it.

In that full house, Phadke lay alone in a room. When he saw Kharemaster all his emotions seemed to well up. He clasped Kharemaster's hands tightly in his own and made him sit on the bed beside him. He stared for a long time at Kharemaster, his eyes filled with emotion. Kharemaster patted Phadke's hands without speaking, then held them tight. Phadke sighed and said, 'Where's the justice? Where's the logic in anything?' He gasped as he spoke with effort, yet continued, 'I have never touched cigarettes or tobacco, yet I have cancer of the throat' Kharemaster looked on helplessly. Phadke had a paroxysm of coughing. Kharemaster steadied him, rubbed his back and gave him a glass of water. Phadke said in a tired tone, 'Now everyone has come here to meet me, but they say, "Well take you to the hospital. There you'll be looked after well and you won't be disturbed by the noise here".' He could no longer check his tears. 'So now I'll lose all the things I have here—the company of my loved ones, my grandchildren's prattle, my familiar surroundings!' He held Kharemaster's hands tightly in his own. Kharemaster was at a loss for words. Finally he rose to leave. Phadke still had his hands tightly gripped in his own. He repeated, 'Please come again.' Saying, 'I promise I will,' Kharemaster gently removed his hands from the iron clasp and turned towards the door. At that instant, Phadke broke down. He stretched his open palms towards Kharemaster in supplication and let forth an anguished scream, 'Kharemaster, I'm going to die.' Kharemaster was rooted to the spot. The entire household ran to the room, frightened out of their wits. Phadke's screams continued.

Kharemaster stepped out of the room. Phadke's cries reverberated in the air. When he came outside the gate; he could still hear the wail—the wail that almost broke his heart.

Shalini, passed her Inter Science and won admission to the medical college in Bombay. Kharemaster took her to Bombay to enrol her and to get her settled in the college. He was to return by the morning train, Indutai had prepared his favourite meal; now she anxiously awaited his arrival.

She looked around her. Today, the house felt very lonely. One after the other, the children had grown up and gone their way. Yesterday, the last child had left home. Now it was empty. From now on, it would be just the two of them. Her heart was heavy as she waited. Kharemaster arrived. He seemed content yet Indutai noticed that he looked tired, and she attributed it to the strain of the journey. She knew that his thinking and worrying never ceased. He washed up, and Indutai served him his lunch. In a voice heavy with fatigue, he told Indutai about the arrangements he had made for Shalini. Then he said, 'Today, after many years I'm at peace. Now our last responsibility is over.' Indutai looked at him but said nothing. Kharemaster looked at Indutai and said, 'All this was possible because of you.' Indutai shook her head in mute protest.

Kharemaster grew pensive. He paused as he was eating. Indutai asked anxiously, 'Is anything wrong?' 'No, no. I'm just recollecting everything from Manutai's birth onwards. And I'm wondering what, if anything, will the children remember?' He picked up his glass to drink water, but it fell from his hand. His lips, eyes, and mouth became contorted and he collapsed. Indutai screamed! The servants came running. The doctor arrived, followed closely by Mathu. Kharemaster had had a stroke.

A few days later Kharemaster passed away.

End